

Postanarchism

a politics of anti-politics

Saul Newman

2011

Contents

Abstract	3
Introduction	3
The crisis of ‘metanarratives’	6
A post-sovereign model of power	8
The displacement of the subject	11
A political anarchism?	13
Conclusion	15

Abstract

This article outlines a politics of postanarchism, which is based on a radical renewal—via post-structuralist theory—of classical anarchism’s critique of statism and authority and its political ethics of egalibertarianism. I contend that while many of the theoretical categories of classical anarchism continue to be relevant today—and indeed are becoming more relevant with the collapse of competing radical projects and what might be seen as a paradigm shift from the representative politics of the party and vanguard to that of movements and decentralized networks—its humanist and rationalist epistemological framework needs to be rethought in the light of post-structuralist and postmodern theories. Here I develop an alternative understanding of anarchism based on a non-essentialist politics of autonomy.

Introduction

How should we think about radical politics today, at a time strongly marked by, on the one hand, the collapse of the Communist state systems—and by, on the other hand, the crisis of capitalism, or at least the ideological (and economic) bankruptcy of its neoliberal form that predominated since 1989? The past two decades have seen the breakdown of two rival political, economic and ideological worlds; and the so-called Third Way, which provided the social democratic window-dressing for an unfettered global capitalism, fared little better. Given these conditions, what sort of horizon can radical political struggles today draw upon? What kind of imaginary animates them?

This article contends that contemporary radical politics is characterized by a ‘libertarian impulse,’ a heterodox anti-authoritarian current that has always been present in radical politics, but that has for a long time been overshadowed, marginalized and obscured by both Marxism and social democracy.¹ This heterogeneous current, however, has become more prominent today in the midst of new forms of politics that take the shape of movements and decentralized networks rather than political parties and vanguards, which are no longer organized around defined class identities and issues, and which therefore no longer conform to the Marxist or social democratic models. Various movements and affinity groups that converge around the themes of ‘alter-globalization’ or ‘anti-capitalism,’ and that are organized horizontally and in a de-centralized manner that defies hierarchy and leadership, might be seen as an example of this libertarian politics²—a politics that seeks autonomy from the state and rejects the idea of representation within the formal channels of political power.

Furthermore, a certain libertarian impulse can be detected in radical political thought today, particularly that which comes out of the continental tradition. Indeed, many contemporary critical thinkers, such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Alain Badiou, Jacques Rancière and

¹ Daniel Bensaid, in a review essay some years ago on John Holloway’s book *Change the World without Taking Power*, spoke of a ‘libertarian current,’ a heterogeneous anti-authoritarian impulse that runs through the tradition of radical politics, intersecting at times with Marxism and at other times departing from it. Bensaid identifies three key moments in libertarian thought: the classical anarchism of Bakunin, Proudhon and Stirner in the 19th century; the anti-institutionalism and anti-parliamentarianism of Luxemburg, Sorel and the syndicalists; and what he calls the neo-libertarianism of contemporary thinkers such as Hardt and Negri. See D. Bensaid, ‘On a recent book by John Holloway,’ *Historical Materialism*, 13(4) (2004), pp. 169–192.

² See for instance M. Rupert, ‘Anti-capitalist convergence? Anarchism, socialism and the global justice movement,’ in M. Steger (Ed.) *Rethinking Globalism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), pp. 121–135.

Giorgio Agamben, have, in very different ways, sought to theorize new modes of political action and subjectivity that are no longer bound by the categories of class, party and state.³ It is not my aim here to survey these discussions and debates on contemporary critical thought. Yet it is worth remarking on the unacknowledged proximity between these ideas and those of classical anarchism, and indeed, the debt that is owed here to this much overlooked theoretical tradition.⁴ Many of the themes and preoccupations of these contemporary thinkers seem to directly reflect the thought of the classical 19th-century anarchists, engaged as they were in major debates with Marx and his followers over revolutionary strategy and the role of the state. Indeed, Hardt and Negri's claim that 'We are not anarchists but communists'⁵ seems to belie a much closer affinity with the anarchist tradition than they are willing to acknowledge, especially with regard to their idea of a post-class collective subject—the multitude—that emerges spontaneously in opposition to capitalism and sovereignty.

Therefore, the libertarian moment that conditions both contemporary radical politics and theory might perhaps be thought as an anarchist moment; at least it draws its inspiration, in part, from anarchism. Therefore, present circumstances demand at least a substantive re-engagement with the anarchist tradition. Indeed, it is my contention that anarchism—or left-libertarianism—forms the horizon for radical politics today, and has in a way *always* formed its horizon, being the ultimate ethical and political expression of the twin imperatives of equality and liberty that constitute the very language of emancipation. What I mean by this is that because anarchism combines liberty and equality to the greatest possible degree, it serves as an endpoint or limit condition for radical politics. For instance, the post-revolutionary societies depicted by Marx and even Lenin—communist societies of abundance and freedom, liberated from forced work, property and centralized government, where 'the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all'—are precisely anarchist societies and are virtually indistinguishable from many of the aspirations of anarchist thinkers and revolutionaries. The celebration by Engels of the radical and decentralized democracy of the Paris Commune of 1871 is mirrored in the admiration for the same event expressed by anarchists such as Bakunin and Kropotkin, even though the interpretations differed (for Engels it was the first example of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat'; whereas for Bakunin it signified something different, an anarchist social revolution⁶). While it is important to highlight the differences between anarchism and Marxism as ideologies, we should be wary of drawing too sharp a line here: one should, instead, recognize the heterogeneity and mutual influence of *both* the traditions, which share, I would argue, a common imaginary of statelessness.

The vital lesson that anarchism teaches, and continues to teach, radical politics is that liberty and equality are inextricable, that they must always go together, and that one cannot come at the expense of the other. At the heart of anarchism, then, is a politics and ethics of *equal-liberty*, which might be summed up in the following words of Bakunin:

³ For instance, Alain Badiou has suggested that what is needed today is a radical politics that is autonomous from the Party form, which he sees as being linked inexorably to the State—a politics that 'puts the State at a distance.' A. Badiou, *Metapolitics*, trans. J. Barker (London: Verso, 2005), p. 145.

⁴ Elsewhere I have suggested that classical anarchism is the 'missing link' to both poststructuralism and contemporary continental theory. See also, S. Newman, 'Anarchism, poststructuralism and the future of radical politics,' *SubStance*, 36(2) (2007), pp. 3–19.

⁵ M. Hardt and A. Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 350.

⁶ See K. Marx, F. Engels, M. Bakunin, P. Kropotkin and V. Lenin, *Writings on the Paris Commune* (St. Petersburg, FL: Red and Black Publishers, 2008).

I am free only when all human beings surrounding me—men and women alike—are equally free. The freedom of others, far from limiting or negating my liberty, is on the contrary its necessary condition and confirmation. I become free in the true sense only by virtue of the liberty of others, so much so that the greater the number of free people surrounding me the deeper and greater and more extensive their liberty, the deeper and larger becomes my liberty.⁷

So, the condition for freedom is not only social and economic equality, but also the equal freedom of others. Indeed, this could be considered the political ethics of left-libertarianism or libertarian socialism more broadly.

Yet, where this libertarian position departs from other forms of socialism is not simply in its insistence that individual liberty must not be sacrificed to economic and social equality, but also its insistence that equal-liberty cannot be fully realized within the framework of the state. The state imposes an inevitable constraint on equal-liberty, and does so in two ways: its intervention in social relations will always restrict liberty, imposing upon the people unnecessary regulations and an arbitrary power that violates, as William Godwin claimed, individual autonomy, self-determination and the ‘right of private judgement.’⁸ Similarly, the principle of equality is violated if it is enforced by the state, since this would mean a hierarchical principle of command and obedience, and thus the institutionalization of a political inequality between the state and the people over whom it exercises power. In this way, then, the thinking of the politics of equality and liberty together—which as I have argued is the central task of radical politics—necessitates at the same time a thinking of politics outside the state. Indeed, the fundamental contribution of anarchism to radical politics is the unmasking of state power—and here anarchism proved much more radical than Marxism—and the elaboration of a politics that is autonomous from the state. I shall return to this point later.

However, if present conditions demand a ‘return’ to anarchism, what sort of return is possible here? It cannot simply be the restating of anarchism in its original 19th-century form. While there are many aspects of the classical anarchist tradition that should be retained, not least of which is the political ethics of equal-liberty and solidarity, there are other aspects that need to be revised in the light of more recent theoretical and political developments. Indeed, this would apply to all forms of radical thought—including anarchism and many forms of socialism—which have their foundations in the discourses of Enlightenment humanism and rationalism. While it is certainly going too far to say that the Enlightenment is out of date—indeed, what is timely here would be a rethinking and renewal of the Kantian spirit of immanent critique⁹—the theoretical and epistemological conditions of what is, perhaps problematically, termed ‘postmodernity’ demands at least an interrogation of its limits and assumptions; assumptions about, for instance, the liberating power of rationality and truth, and the transparency of the subject. Indeed, a whole series

⁷ M. Bakunin, *Political Philosophy of Mikhail Bakunin: Scientific Anarchism*, ed. G. P. Maximoff (London: Free Press of Glencoe, 1953), p. 267.

⁸ W. Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985 [1793]), pp. 204–205.

⁹ Indeed, as Michel Foucault shows in his essay on Kant, the Enlightenment embodies a critical ethos and the free and autonomous use of reason—something that can work against other rigidifying tendencies within Enlightenment thought. It is this ethos that allows us, as Foucault says, to refuse what he calls the ‘blackmail of the Enlightenment,’ by which one either accepts or rejects it as a unified whole. See M. Foucault, ‘What is Enlightenment?’ in *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth: The Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984*, vol. 1, ed. P. Rabinow, trans. R. Hurley (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 313.

of theoretical interventions, from Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis to the poststructuralist thought of Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, and Deleuze and Guattari, have cast doubt on some of the central categories of Enlightenment and humanist thought. Yet, while these interventions have important implications for classical anarchism, whose foundations do indeed lie in a certain humanism and rationalism, they are not necessarily inimical to it, and indeed, as I have suggested elsewhere,¹⁰ there is a certain continuity between the anti-authoritarian impulse of classical anarchism and the desire, central to poststructuralism and deconstruction, to expose the inconsistencies in discourses of authority and the power effects of ideas, practices and institutions that we have come to consider as politically innocent.

In gesturing towards a new formulation of anarchism—what I call postanarchism¹¹—let us try to understand some of the main implications of poststructuralist theory for anarchist political philosophy:

The crisis of ‘metanarratives’

The postmodern condition has been most famously and succinctly summed up by Jean-Francois Lyotard’s definition: *an incredulity toward metanarratives*.¹² The metanarrative is understood as a universal idea or discourse that is central to the experience of modernity. This might be found in the notion of a universal objective truth, and the idea that the world is becoming more rationally intelligible through advances in science. Or it might be seen in the Hegelian dialectic, whose unfolding determines history. Here we might also think of the Marxist discourse of proletarian emancipation. All these ideas derive from the Enlightenment, and they imply a truth that is absolute and universal, and that will (eventually) be rationally grasped by everyone. Moreover, the metanarrative implies a certain knowledge about society: society is understood either as an integrated whole or as internally divided, as in the Marxist imagery of class struggle. Indeed, these two opposed understandings of society are really mirror images of one another; they are united by the common assumption that social reality is wholly transparent and intelligible.

So why are these metanarratives breaking down; why do we no longer believe in them? Lyotard explores the reasons for their dissolution in an examination of the condition of knowledge in contemporary post-industrial society. According to Lyotard, scientific knowledge is experiencing a crisis of legitimation, where the rules of truth which determine what statements can be admitted to a ‘scientific’ body of statements, no longer operate as authoritatively as they once did. Because of certain transformations that knowledge is undergoing in the post-Industrial Age, this process of legitimation has become ever more questionable and unstable: the contingency and arbitrariness of its operation—the fact that it is ultimately based on acts of power and exclusion—are becoming apparent, thus producing a crisis of representation. In short, it is increasingly difficult for scientific knowledge to claim a privileged status as being the only arbiter of truth. Does this not displace the universal position of scientific knowledge; does science not become, under the conditions of commodification and bureaucratization, just another form of knowledge, another

¹⁰ See S. Newman, *From Bakunin to Lacan: Anti-authoritarianism and the Dislocation of Power* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2001).

¹¹ See S. Newman, *The Politics of Postanarchism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010).

¹² J.-F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), p. xxiv.

narrative? Moreover, Lyotard points to a breakdown of the knowledge about society: society can no longer be adequately represented by knowledge—either as a unified whole or as a class-divided body. The social bonds that gave a consistency of representation to society are themselves being redefined through the language games that constitute it. There is, according to Lyotard, an “atomization” of the social into flexible networks of language games....¹³ This does not mean that the social bond is dissolving altogether; merely that there is no longer one dominant, coherent understanding of society but, rather, a plurality of different narratives or perspectives. Here we might think of the multiplicity of heterogeneous discourses, ideological perspectives, religious sensibilities, moral positions and social identities that make up contemporary societies.

This critique of the absolutism of scientific knowledge is also reflected in Paul Feyerabend’s anarchist approach to science. His argument is that the methodological rules imposed by science are ultimately arbitrary and historically contingent, that they are not based on any firm claim to truth. Indeed, many of the most important scientific discoveries—the Copernican Revolution, for instance—were only possible through a breaking of the existing methodological rules. This tells us that the authority of scientific knowledge, based on rigid rules of enquiry, is on a much shakier ground than it would like to admit. It is much more productive, according to Feyerabend, and indeed much closer to the truth of scientific enquiry, to take an *anarchist* view of science—to question the authority and legitimacy of scientific knowledge, and to violate its methodological rules. Indeed, Feyerabend finds it extraordinary that anarchist political thinkers—and here he cites Kropotkin—while questioning all forms of political authority, uphold unquestioningly the epistemological authority of science, and indeed base their whole philosophy on its rather uncertain claims.¹⁴ Why should the same freedom of thought, speech and action, and the same scepticism about authority that anarchists demand in the field of politics, not also translate into the field of scientific enquiry?

So the problem alluded to in Feyerabend’s critique is that classical anarchism based itself upon a series of metanarratives, not only about mankind’s inevitable revolt against state authority and the subsequent flourishing of human freedom, but also about the emancipatory potential of scientific knowledge. What is central to classical anarchist philosophy is a positivism that sees social relations as constituted by self-regulating natural mechanisms, laws, relations and processes which are rational and which, if left alone, would allow a more harmonious social order, free from the distortions and oppression of state authority, to emerge. For instance, Bakunin posited the idea of ‘immutable’ natural laws and processes whose truth would be revealed through science, and whose unfolding determined social progress and the intellectual, moral and material development of humanity from a state of slavery and ignorance to a state of freedom.¹⁵ A similar idea can be found in Godwin’s rationalist anarchism, in which social improvements and the emergence of a more just and equal society are closely bound up with the progress of science, as well as the inevitable development of people’s moral and intellectual capacities.¹⁶ This positivist approach is also evident in Kropotkin’s theory of social relations and ethical relations as

¹³ Lyotard, *ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁴ See P. Feyerabend, *Against Method* (London: Verso, 1993), p. 14.

¹⁵ Bakunin, *op. cit.*, Ref. 7, p. 146. This notion of unfolding of an immanent rationality that is at the core of social and human relations is also present in Murray Bookchin’s idea of ‘dialectical naturalism.’ See *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy* (Paolo Alto, CA: Cheshire Books, 1982).

¹⁶ Godwin, *op. cit.*, Ref. 8, p. 740.

being based on an innate tendency towards mutual aid and assistance, something which we have inherited from the animal world and which is a major factor in evolutionary survival.¹⁷

However, if we were to adopt a position of incredulity or at least scepticism towards meta-narratives generally, and to the epistemological authority of scientific knowledge in particular, we would have to reflect on the possibility of an anarchism without these deep foundations in science and rationality; an anarchism that did not make universal claims about human nature, natural laws or an unfolding rationality immanent in social progress. We would have to conceive of an anarchism that did not seek to make itself into a science. Instead, we should ask Michel Foucault's question, which he poses in response to the scientific aspirations of Marxism: '...“What types of knowledge are you trying to disqualify when you say that you are a science?”’¹⁸ In other words, we must interrogate the power effects and discursive gestures of exclusion inherent in laying claim to the status of 'science.' It is not so much a question of whether scientific knowledge is right or wrong, true or false, but rather the way in which it promotes a hierarchization of knowledge and thus a certain discursive authoritarianism. In opposition to this we should assert, as Foucault counsels us to do, a genealogical position, which is that of 'anti-science.' This does not mean that we must disregard the use of scientific knowledge, or celebrate irrationalism, but rather that we retain a critical perspective that is always sensitive to science's power effects: 'Genealogy has to fight the power-effects characteristic of any discourse that is regarded as scientific.'¹⁹ It is a question of *politicizing* knowledge, rationality and truth: in other words, rather than according truth a universal position of abstract neutrality, such that it can always be proclaimed in absolute opposition to the epistemological distortions of power, it should be seen as a weapon wielded in a battle, spoken from the partisan position of one directly engaged in struggle. We should think in terms of, as Foucault puts it, an 'insurrection of knowledges.'²⁰ To do so would be to extend the anarchist critique of political authority to the epistemological authority of science.

A post-sovereign model of power

The second major implication of poststructuralist, and particularly Foucauldian, theory lies in the formulation of a new concept of power, one that can no longer be entirely contained within the classical revolutionary model central to anarchist philosophy. Classical anarchism concentrates its revolutionary energy on the state, a structure in which power relations are said to be centralized and organized in a hierarchical and authoritarian manner; a structure that intervenes in social life in oppressive, irrational and destructive ways. Here the state enshrines the principle of sovereignty—a 'ruling principle' of absolute authority that stands above social relations, monopolizing violence, and embodying an inequality of power relations and a symbolic absolutism that is inimical to the idea of a free society.

There is thus imagined, in classical anarchist thought, a kind of Manichean opposition between society and the state. Bakunin, for instance, sharply differentiates natural laws, which are con-

¹⁷ See P. Kropotkin, *Ethics: Origin and Development*, trans. L. S. Friedland (New York: Tudor Publishing, 1947); and *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*, ed. P. Avrich (New York: New York University, 1972).

¹⁸ M. Foucault, *Society Must be Defended: Lectures at the Collège De France 1975–76*, trans. D. Macey (London: Allen Lane, 2003), p. 10.

¹⁹ Foucault, *ibid.*, p. 9.

²⁰ Foucault, *ibid.*

stitutive of social relations and human subjectivity, from the ‘artificial authority’ of state power and political institutions. Governments and state institutions were ‘pneumatic machines’ that were ‘entirely mechanical and artificial,’ in contrast to freely formed social relations.²¹ That was why—in contrast to the Marxists for whom the state was an apparatus that could be taken over by the proletariat and used in the ‘transitional period’ to build socialism—the state was seen by the anarchists as a fundamental obstacle to the revolution which should be abolished at the outset. As Kropotkin puts it: ‘And there are those who, like us, see in the State, not only its actual form and in all forms of domination that it might assume, but in its very essence, an obstacle to the social revolution.’²² As the anarchists correctly predicted, if the state was not overcome in the revolution—which was imagined as a *social* rather than political revolution, a revolution of society against political power—then state power would be perpetuated and would give rise to new class contradictions and hierarchies.

However, while this anarchist theory of the state as an autonomous structure of power and domination that was irreducible to class relations and the economic mode of production showed a greater sensitivity to the dangers of power than was evident in the Marxist tradition, it was at the same time confined to a classical paradigm of sovereignty. The state machines described by the anarchists of the 19th century, with their rulers, bureaucrats, soldiers, policemen, gaolers, executioners and priests, were relatively crude and autocratic apparatuses. While I am not of course denying that the state exists today, or that its operation is often brutally violent and oppressive, one would at the same time have to acknowledge that the operation of power in contemporary societies is far more complex and differentiated than was conceivable within the classical anarchist analysis. Can power still be isolated within the state and within the symbolic framework of sovereignty? Sovereignty itself, in our networked, global age, has become partially deterritorialized and fragmented, spilling out beyond the traditional borders of the nation-state; indeed, we see the continual blurring of borders, where diffuse mechanisms of security, surveillance and control are no longer strictly determined within national boundaries. Prisons that are not prisons but camps, wars that are no longer wars but ‘policing’ operations, global networks of surveillance—we are in the midst of, as Giorgio Agamben would put it, a *zone of indistinction*,²³ in which national sovereignty blurs into global security while at the same time reifying and fetishizing existing borders, and mobilizing new ones everywhere.

To point to such transformations is not a matter of placing in doubt the existence of the state as an assemblage of power and domination, but rather of understanding what ‘the state’ means today. Here I think it is more productive to adopt Foucault’s approach and analyse the various permutations of state power from the classical age onwards; and therefore to see the state in terms of various discourses, rationalities and mechanisms of governmentality, security and biopolitics.²⁴ However, this way of thinking about the state—not as an essence, but as a *strategy* (or strategies)—implies a more ambiguous relationship with the social state: one of intense interaction rather than opposition and oppression. We need to get away, as Foucault says, from a certain classical image of state sovereignty. In developing an alternative theorization of power

²¹ Bakunin, *op. cit.*, Ref. 7, p. 212.

²² P. Kropotkin, *The State: Its Historic Role* (London: Freedom Press, 1943), p. 37.

²³ See G. Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. D. Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

²⁴ See M. Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977–1978*, ed. M. Senellart (Houndmills/Basingstoke/Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

based on war and the strategic mobilization of force relations, rather than around questions of legitimacy, Foucault famously proclaimed that ‘we need to cut off the king’s head.’²⁵ In understanding power in terms of war and strategy, rather than legitimacy and consent, Foucault shares much with the anarchists, who also rejected social contract theories of sovereignty in order to unmask the domination and violence behind these ideological veils.²⁶ However, in calling for the symbolic decapitation of the sovereign ‘image’ of power, Foucault is also making an important methodological point that in some ways takes the analysis of power beyond the terrain of classical anarchist thought: rather than seeing power as emanating from a certain symbolic structure of sovereignty—a ‘ruling principle’—power should be studied from the ground up, at the level of its capillary workings and at its infinitesimal limits. This does not mean that state power no longer exists, but that it should be seen as the culmination of power relations rather than their source. Power, from a Foucauldian point of view, should be seen as co-extensive with society, running through the social body and in everyday relations, and making possible diverse social practices of punishing, absolving, disciplining, educating, healing, classifying, training, guiding, and so on. As Foucault tells us, ‘power is everywhere because it comes from everywhere.’²⁷

Where this ‘post’-sovereign notion of power as dispersed, diffuse, differentiated and, indeed, constitutive of social relations and identities, creates conceptual difficulties for classical anarchism is that it makes problematic a state-centric view of power as well as disturbing the idea of an ontological opposition between the power and society. If power weaves itself into the fabric of society, then upon what sort of foundation can the social revolution against power be imagined? Also, if power is to be overthrown, where is it to be isolated? There is no more a Winter Palace to storm or to destroy here, and any revolutionary discourse, in the light of this revision in the theory of power, is faced with the much more complex task of mapping the diverse forms of power that are found throughout the social field. Indeed, the very idea of a revolution as an all-encompassing event that throws off the shackles of power once and for all is much more difficult to conceive now. Perhaps it makes more sense to think in terms of localized forms of resistance around and against specific forms of domination, as well as the creation of autonomous sites, practices, discourses and relationships in cracks of power and at its limits, rather than imagining that state power can be grasped and overthrown in a totalizing sense.

Moreover, if we accept Foucault’s insight that power in one form or another will always be with us—in the sense that power is constitutive of all social relations—then we also have to question the idea of a final liberation from power. We do not pass from a society of power to a society of freedom—as was the case in the classical anarchist revolutionary narrative—but rather we engage in an ongoing modification of relations of power through ethical practices of freedom. Foucault makes the important point that the idea of liberation—while it should not be abandoned—does not sufficiently take into account the forms of power that will inevitably emerge in a post-liberation society. Therefore,

²⁵ M. Foucault, ‘Truth and power,’ in C. Gordon (Ed.) *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–77* (New York: Harvester Press, 1980), p. 121.

²⁶ See Foucault, *op. cit.*, Ref. 18.

²⁷ M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality VI: Introduction*, trans. R. Hunter (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), p. 93.

...this practice of liberation is not in itself sufficient to define the practices of freedom that will still be needed if this people, this society, and these individuals are able to define admissible and acceptable forms of existence or political society....²⁸

While anarchism, with its ethics of anti-authoritarianism and equal-liberty, is best equipped to develop these sorts of practices of freedom, this would at the same time involve a certain modification of its revolutionary grand narrative into a new kind of micro-politics and ethics.

The displacement of the subject

A reformulation of anarchist theory would also involve a relinquishment of its ontological foundation in a certain humanist and Enlightenment conception of the subject—the subject who bears an essential humanity, understood in terms of an innate goodness and rationality. This conception of the subject was very much part of the discourse of classical anarchism, where its key proponents spoke of the flourishing of humanity and the progressive enlightenment of mankind, as well as an innate tendency towards solidarity and mutual aid. To cast doubt on such claims is not to say that there is no possibility of mutual aid, rational action, free association and voluntary cooperation—anarchism would not be thinkable at all without this potential for radically different forms of social existence. However, I think it is assuming too much to claim that these possibilities are somehow innate or inherited human tendencies that exist latently within us as—to use Murray Bookchin’s naturalistic metaphor—a flower waiting to blossom.²⁹ Moreover, to remain sceptical of such ideas does not mean, on the other hand, that one propagates a dark, pessimistic, Hobbesian vision of humanity; this is equally essentialist, a kind of inverse idealism. Rather, we should think of subjectivity as an indeterminate field of possibilities, potentialities and often conflicting desires and drives.

For instance, psychoanalytic theory shows us that the subject is not a stable or transparent entity, but, on the contrary, one that is thoroughly destabilized by the unconscious—whether understood as the place of the drives, in Freudian terms, or the constitutive limit of the symbolic order, as Lacan sees it. In neither formulation can the subject be understood as an autonomous source of rational and moral agency or as a series of intrinsic interests and properties that exist in opposition to power. Therefore, one of the major questions that psychoanalysis presents to classical anarchism is that of voluntary servitude—in other words, the possibility that, at some level, the subject desires his or her own domination.³⁰ From Freud’s psychoanalysis of groups, whose members fall in love with the figure of the Leader,³¹ to Lacan’s ominous warning to the revolutionaries of May 1968 that what they desired was a new Master,³² psychoanalysis has revealed what might be considered a blind spot in classical revolutionary theory—the subject’s

²⁸ Foucault, *op. cit.*, Ref. 9, pp. 282–283.

²⁹ See Bookchin, *op. cit.*, Ref. 15, p. 31.

³⁰ The problem of self-domination was identified not only by Freudo-Marxists such as Wilhelm Reich in *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980), but also by poststructuralists such as Deleuze and Guattari, for whom one of the central questions for politics was how ‘desire can desire its own repression....’ See *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. B. Massumi (London: Continuum, 2004), pp. 236–237.

³¹ See S. Freud, ‘Group psychology and the analysis of the ego,’ *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 18, trans. and ed. J. Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1955 [1920, 1922]), pp. 69–144.

³² See J. Lacan, ‘Analyticon,’ *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, ed. J.-A. Miller and trans. R. Grigg (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Co., 2007), p. 207.

psychological attachment to the power that dominates him. Psychoanalysis by no means discounts the possibility of human emancipation, sociability and voluntary cooperation: indeed, it points to conflicting tendencies in the subject and in social interactions between the desire for harmonious coexistence and aggressive desires for power and domination. It nevertheless serves as a warning to radical politics about the difficulties associated with dislodging these more authoritarian drives simply through a transformation in social and political conditions. In other words, the revolution must go ‘all the way down’ to the psyche, suggesting the need, once again, for a micro-politics and ethics of freedom—a politics or, indeed, an ‘art,’ as Foucault would put it, of ‘voluntary inservitude.’³³

So we need to take account of the decentring and destabilization of the subject, not only in psychoanalytic theory, but also in poststructuralist theory, where the subject is constituted, albeit it in an indeterminate manner, through relations of language and text (Derrida), assemblages of desire (Deleuze and Guattari), and discourse and power (Foucault). Again, all this has important implications for a revolutionary narrative based around the liberation of the subject from external forces of oppression. The disciplinary and normalizing techniques and discourses that, in the case of Foucault’s analysis, form the subject’s sense of him- or herself—even the sense of himself *as* repressed—complicate any politics of emancipation: ‘[t]he man described for us, whom we are invited to free, is already in himself the effect of a subjection much more profound than himself.’³⁴ All this is not, however, to deny agency to the subject; indeed, it is to make possible new ways of thinking about agency, no longer as based on an essential set of interests or properties, but rather as practices and modes of action in which we create for ourselves new subjectivities. The focus should not be on the unfolding of some sort of human essence or immanent rationality, but rather on processes of subjectivization. Here we should pay particular attention to Max Stirner’s vital distinction between revolution and insurrection, in which the latter involves a kind of self-transformation:

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 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.³⁵

³³ M. Foucault, ‘What is Critique?’, in J. Schmidt (Ed.) *What is Enlightenment: Eighteenth Century Answers and Twentieth Century Questions* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), p. 386.

³⁴ M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. A. Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1991 [1977]), p. 30.

³⁵ M. Stirner, *The Ego and its Own*, ed. D. Leopold (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 279–280.

A political anarchism?

In the earlier section, I have given a brief summary of the main implications of poststructuralist and psychoanalytic theory for classical anarchism, implications that, I would argue, should be taken into account in any attempt to renew anarchism as radical politics. What emerges here is an understanding of anarchism that retains a political and ethical commitment to equal liberty, anti-authoritarianism and solidarity, but that is no longer reliant on ontological foundations in science, biology, human nature or universal rationality. What emerges through this deconstruction, then, is a post-foundational understanding of anarchism: anarchism, no longer as a science, but as a *politics*. This is what I propose we call postanarchism.

Yet, to speak of anarchism as a politics brings to light a strange paradox: classical anarchism, in its rejection of state power and in its shunning of involvement in state or parliamentary politics, often characterized itself as an anti-politics. Indeed, Bakunin describes the main difference between socialists and anarchists in terms of the former wanting to ‘pursue politics of a different kind,’ and the latter aiming at ‘the total abolition of politics.’³⁶ While the former strategy inevitably imprisons one within the paradigm of the state, the latter allows one to transcend and emancipate oneself from the state entirely. Yet, while calling for the abolition of politics in this way, classical anarchists also went into considerable detail in discussing revolutionary tactics, questions of organization and the mobilization of people, as well as the shape of post-revolutionary society—all of which are, of course, political questions, indeed questions of power. So, classical anarchism found itself in the slightly paradoxical position of affirming an anti-political politics or a *politics of anti-politics*.

At the same time, this aporetic moment of tension central to classical anarchism generates new and productive articulations of politics and ethics. The disjunction between politics and anti-politics is what might be called an ‘inclusive’ disjunction: a compound in which one proposition is true only if its opposing proposition is also true. Politics, at least in a radical, emancipatory sense, has only a consistent identity if an anti-political, indeed utopian, dimension is also present—otherwise it remains caught within existing political frameworks and imaginaries. Conversely, anti-politics only makes sense if it takes seriously the tasks of politics—building, constructing, organizing, fighting, making collective decisions and so on—where questions of power and exclusion inevitably emerge. However, this proximity to power does not invalidate anarchism; rather, it leads to a greater sensitivity to the dangers of power and the need to invent, as mentioned before, new micro-political practices of freedom through which power is subjected to an ongoing ethical interrogation.

Where the political pole imposes certain limits, the anti-political pole, by contrast, invokes an outside, a movement beyond limits. It is the signification of the infinite, of the limitless horizon of possibilities. This is both the moment of utopia and, in a different sense, the moment of ethics. Anarchism has an important utopian dimension, even if the classical anarchists themselves claimed not to be utopians but materialists and rationalists. Indeed, some utopian element—whether acknowledged or not—is an essential part of any form of radical politics; to oppose the current order, one inevitably invokes an alternative, utopian imagination. However, we should try to formulate a different approach to utopianism here: the importance of imagining an alternative to the current order is not to lay down a precise programme for the future, but rather to provide

³⁶ Bakunin, *op. cit.*, Ref. 6, pp. 113–114.

a point of exteriority as a way of interrogating the limits of this order. As Miguel Abensour puts it: 'Is it not proper to utopia to propose a new way of proceeding to a *displacement of what is* and what seems to go without saying in the crushing name of "reality"?'³⁷ We are crushed under the weight of the current order, which tells us that *this* is our reality, that what we have now is all there is and all there ever will be. Utopia provides an escape from this stifling reality by imagining an alternative to it; it opens up different possibilities, new 'lines of flight.' Here, we should think about utopia in terms of action in the immediate sense, of creating alternatives within the present, at localized points, rather than waiting for the revolution. Utopia is something that emerges in political struggles themselves.³⁸

Ethics also implies an outside to the existing order, but in a different sense. Ethics, as I understand it here, involves the opening up of the existing political identities, practices, institutions and discourses to an Other which is beyond their terms. Ethics is more than the application of moral and rational norms. It is rather the continual disturbance of the sovereignty of these norms, and the identities and institutions that draw their legitimacy from them, in the name of something that exceeds their grasp. Importantly, then, ethics is what disturbs politics from the outside. This might be understood in the Levinasian sense of 'anarchy': 'Anarchy cannot be sovereign like an *arche*. It can only disturb the State—but in a radical way, making possible moments of negation *without* any affirmation.'³⁹

The point is, however, that politics cannot do without anti-politics, and vice versa. The two must go together. There must always be an anti-political outside, a utopian moment of rupture and excess that disturbs the limits of politics. The ethical moment cannot be eclipsed by the political dimension; nor can it be separated from it, as someone like Carl Schmitt maintained.⁴⁰ If there is to be a concept of the political, it can only be thought through a certain constitutive tension with ethics. At the same time, anti-politics needs to be politically articulated; it needs to be put into action through actual struggles and engagements with different forms of domination. There must be some way of politically measuring the anti-political imaginery, through victories, defeats, and strategic gains and reversals. So while anti-politics points to a transcendence of the current order, it cannot be an escape from it; it must involve an encounter with its limits, and this is where politics comes in. The transcendence of power involves an active engagement with power, not an avoidance of it; the realization of freedom requires an ongoing elaboration of new practices of freedom within the context of power relations.

However, the necessity of engaging with and thinking through power relations does not mean that anarchism today has to abandon the ethical and political horizon of the transcendence of governmental power. What I am suggesting is that this is more productively thought in terms of a *project* of autonomy. Rather than the attainment of an eternal society of freedom beyond the world of power, anarchism should be understood as an ongoing project in which the limits of power are critically interrogated. Liberty is something to be continually and collectively reinvented, rather than simply discovered at the bedrock of human nature. Central to this project is the re-situation of politics outside the representative framework of the state. We should no longer

³⁷ M. Abensour, 'Persistent utopia,' *Constellations*, 15(3) (2008), pp. 406–421.

³⁸ See my rethinking of the relationship between anarchism and utopia in: 'Anarchism, utopianism and the politics of emancipation,' *Anarchism and Utopianism*, eds. L. Davis and R. Kinna (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), pp. 207–220.

³⁹ E. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, trans. A. Lingis (The Hague/London: M. Nijhoff, 1981), p. 194.

⁴⁰ See C. Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. G. Schwab (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

regard the state—an increasingly ambiguous and fragmented arrangement of power in any case—as the basic site of the political. On the contrary, the state is often the order of de-politicization, where the insurgent, anarchic dimension of politics is policed, controlled, regulated and domesticated, channelled into, and thus vitiated within its symbolic structures.

Indeed, if we look around us, and if we look with a different gaze—one that is less focused on the symbols of sovereignty and the formal institutions of power—we can see the emergence of an alternative conception of the political on the terrain that is (inadequately) referred to as ‘civil society’: not only massive mobilizations against global capitalism and war, but also, at a more micro-political level, diverse affinity groups, autonomous movements, social centres, communes, independent media centres, political practices, symbolic gestures and direct action techniques. These constitute alternative sites of decision-making and collective action, and alternative forms of political existence. So if we take, as Foucault counsels us to do, a less universalistic and more partisan gaze—the gaze of the militant rather than the jurist or philosopher-king—we find in this alternative and dissenting world, new possibilities of autonomous political life. Indeed, one could say that the autonomy of the political—so long a preoccupation of political theory, from Machiavelli to Carl Schmitt—today only makes sense as a politics of autonomy.

Conclusion

Postanarchism thus effects a displacement of the political from the state order, renewing the possibilities of anarchism today as a practice of politics and a project of autonomy. As I have shown, this is only possible through rethinking some of the conceptual categories and epistemological foundations of classical anarchism. However, this modification of anarchism along post-foundational lines does not in any sense suggest that anarchism as a political ideology is somehow out of date. On the contrary, it is to affirm anarchism’s relevance today to social movements and new forms of struggle—indeed, to affirm anarchism as the politico-ethical horizon in relation to which radical politics today must situate itself—that this theoretical study has been carried out.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Saul Newman
Postanarchism
a politics of anti-politics
2011

Journal of Political Ideologies, Volume 16, 2011 — Issue 3: The libertarian impulse.
DOI:10.1080/13569317.2011.607301

theanarchistlibrary.org