Anarchy, Power, and Poststructuralism

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"Finally came Stirner, the prophet of contemporary anarchism."
— Frederick Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*
(1886)

In 1994 Todd May initiated a new turn in contemporary theory — poststructuralist anarchism, commonly abbreviated to "post-anarchism." May's seminal study, *The Political Philosophy of Post-structuralist Anarchism* called attention to ways in which the political philosophy of anarchism echoes the concerns of poststructuralist thought, notably in its critique of oppression. Taking aim at Marxism, he (rightly) argued that anarchism has a more sophisticated grasp of how oppression disperses across the social field. According to May, Marxists did not address the hierarchical relations sustaining this state of affairs. Instead, they called for the seizure of the reigns of power by a benighted proletariat that would subordinate society to its will by restructuring economic relations in the image of socialism (49).[1] Historically, anarchists opposed this, because they were suspicious of any social formation, however well intentioned, exercising power over others. Anarchism interrogated relations of domination with the goal of destroying all representational forms of power, precisely because such politics are always already at one remove from the represented (May, 50).

However, as a corollary to his praise for this thorough-going attack on domination in all its forms, May argued that anarchism (theoretically) was not up to the task of realizing its political potential. Referencing "classical" figures from the nineteenth-century European wing of the movement, May suggested that anarchists had yet to come to terms with power as a positive ground for action. The anarchist project, he argued, is based on a fallacious "humanist" notion that "the human essence is a good essence, which relations of power suppress and deny." This impoverished notion of power as ever oppressive, never productive, was the Achilles heel of anarchist political philosophy (ibid., 62). Hence May's call for a new and improved "poststructuralist anarchism." The poststructuralist anarchist would not shy away from power: she would shed the husk of humanism the better to exercise power "tactically" within an ethical practice guided by Habermas's universalist theory of communicative action (ibid., 146).

My purpose is not to further May's positioning of anarchism as poststructuralist. Rather, I am interested in the claim that "classical" anarchism — and by extension, contemporary anarchism — founds its politics on a flawed conception of power and its relationship to society. Based on this premise, May has urged anarchist-oriented theorists to press on without looking back — and some, notably Lewis Call and Saul Newman, have done just that.[2] But surely, if one claims to be fundamentally revising a political tradition, then one has an obligation to familiarize oneself

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[1] Summarizing this argument, May cites David Wieck, "The Negativity of Anarchism," (1975) in *Reinventing Anarchy*, ed. Howard Ehrlich, Carol Ehrkich, David DeLeon, and Glenda Morris (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), 41: "Basic to Marxism is the view that economic power is the key to a liberation of which the power of a party, the power of government, and the power of a specific class are (or are to be) instruments. Basic to anarchism is the opposing view that the abolition of domination and tyranny depends on their negation, in thought and when possible action, in every form and at every step, from now on, progressively, by every individual and group, in movements of liberation as well as elsewhere, no matter the state of consciousness of entire social classes."

[2] See, for example, Lewis Call, *Postmodern Anarchism* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2002), 15–24 and Saul Newman, "Anarchism and the Politics of Resentment," *I am not a Man, I am Dynamite!: Nietzsche and the Anarchist Tradition* ed. John Moore with Spencer Sunshine (New York: Autonomedia, 2005), 107–126. For a more extended variation of the same argument, see Saul Newman, *From Bakunin to Lacan: Anti-Authoritarianism and the Dislocation of Power* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2001).

with that tradition's theoretical foundations. This is my modest aim: to provide a brief corrective meditation on "classical" anarchism and power.

Let us begin with Emma Goldman's (1869–1940) closing summary of anarchist principles, circa 1900, from her essay, "Anarchism: What it Really Stands For":

> Anarchism, then, really stands for the liberation of the human mind from the domination of religion; the liberation of the human body from the domination of property; liberation from the shackles and restraint of government. Anarchism stands for a social order based on the free grouping of individuals for the purpose of producing real social wealth, an order that will guarantee to every human being free access to the earth and full enjoyment of the necessities of life, according to individual desires, tastes, and inclinations. (62)

Goldman's statement certainly confirms May's point concerning how anarchism widens the political field (May, 50). Goldman critiques religion for oppressing us psychologically, capitalist economics for endangering our corporal well-being, and government for shutting down our freedoms. She also asserts that the purpose of anarchism is to liberate humanity from these tyrannies. That said, one searches in vain for any suggestion that Goldman's liberated individuals are, as May would have it, a priori good. Rather, she posits a situated politics in which individuality differentiates endlessly, according to each subject's "desires, tastes and inclinations."

Goldman counted anarchist-communist Peter Kropotkin (1842–1921) among her most important influences, so it is appropriate we turn to him for further insight regarding the anarchist subject. In his 1896 essay, "Anarchism: Its Philosophy and Ideal" (Kropotkin, 143), Kropotkin wrote that anarchism was synonymous with "variety, conflict." In an anarchist society "anti-social" behavior would inevitably arise, as it does at present; the difference being that this behavior, if judged reprehensible, would be dealt with according to anarchist principles, as he argued in his 1891 "Anarchist Morality" (Kropotkin, 106). More positively, the libertarian refusal to "model individuals according to an abstract idea" or "mutilate them by religion, law or government" allowed for a specifically anarchist type of morality to flourish (ibid., 113). This morality entailed the unceasing interrogation of existing social norms, in recognition that morals are social constructs, and that there are no absolutes guiding ethical behavior. Quoting "the unconsciously anarchist" Jean-Marie Guyau (1824–1882), Kropotkin characterized anarchist morality as "a superabundance of life, which demands to be exercised, to give itself … the consciousness of power" (ibid., 108). He continued: "Be strong. Overflow with emotional and intellectual energy, and you will spread your intelligence, your love, your energy of action broadcast among others! This is what all moral teaching comes to" (ibid., 109). Shades of Friedrich Nietzsche? Kropotkin is citing a passage from Guyau's *Esquisse d'une morale sans obligation, ni sanction* (1884), a book that also influenced Nietzsche's "overman" concept and the related idea of going "beyond good and evil" — an interesting confluence, to say the least, given poststructuralism's indebtedness to the German philosopher.[3] More to the point, Kropotkin's subject, who exercises power by shaping her

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[3] Hans Erich Lampl, *Zweistimmigkeit-Einstimmigkeit: Friedrich Nietzsche und Jean-Marie Guyau (Esquisse d'une morale sans obligation, ni sanction).* (Cuxhaven: Junghans-Verlag, 1990), passim. For further documentation of Nietzsche's ownership and interest in this book, see muse.jhu.edu./journal_of_the_history_of_ideas/v058/58.4brobjer_append01.html. Accessed 10/01/2006. On Nietzsche and poststructuralism see Alan D. Schrift, *Nietzsche's French Legacy: A Genealogy of Poststructuralism* (London: Routledge, 1995), passim.

own values to accord with a "superabundance" of life, is antithetical to May's claim regarding "classic" anarchism: "human essence is a good essence, which relations of power suppress and deny." Kropotkin, contra May, embeds power in the subject and configures the unleashing of that power on morality as the marker of social liberation, predicting that it will generate both "anti-social" (fostering debate) and "social" (socially accepted) behavior in the process.

Indeed, it is worth underlining that the anarchist subject's power, situated socially, it is not reactive; it is generative. Kropotkin wants power to "overflow"; it has to if a free social order is to be realized. We find the same perspective articulated by Michael Bakunin (1846–1881), the anarchist who most famously declared "the destructive urge is also a creative urge" in his reflections on freedom and equality:

> 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. (267)

Anarchist social theory develops out of this perspective. Bakunin goes on to theorize the necessity of socializing property in the name of individual liberty. Rejecting both state-adjudicated socialism and capitalism, he declares, "We are convinced that freedom without socialism is privilege and injustice, and that socialism without freedom is slavery and brutality" (ibid., 269). Kropotkin similarly argued for the necessity of socializing property, while Pierre Joseph Proudhon (1809–1864), upheld the institution of private ownership on a small scale on the condition that it never become an instrument of domination.[4]

Again, theory mitigates against the characterizations of the poststructuralist anarchists. In "Anarchism and the Politics of Resentment," Saul Newman asserts that "classical" anarchism assumes "society and our everyday actions, although oppressed by power, are ontologically separate from it" (120). But if power is separate from society, why has so much theorizing been devoted to the social conditions through which libertarian power can be realized? The poststructuralist anarchists have yet to acknowledge, let alone address, this issue.

How do we account for the "classical" blind spot in their field of vision? I would conjecture that it arises from a particular genealogy. As Jonathan Purkis relates, in the 1960s the key theorists of poststructuralism emerged from and were reacting to the radical wing of a structuralist movement dominated by Marxism. Having adopted the structuralist critique of the Enlightenment subject as unitary and absolute, they then rejected the Marxist hierarchy of social forces that determined, in the last instance, the subject's formation (Purkis, 50).[5] Seeking to develop a more dynamic notion of the decentered subject while deepening their critique of authoritarianism in all its guises, poststructuralists drew, in the first instance, on Nietzsche as the understudied alternative to Marx (see Purkis, 51–52). Anarchism, it appears, never showed itself on the political horizon. Perhaps this can be attributed to a lingering misreading of the anarchist subject as just another variation of the humanist individual, autonomous from the social forces, which

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[4] On Kropotkin and Proudhon see Antliff, 3–5.

[5] Purkis is referring to Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Giles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, Julia Kristeva and the later work of Roland Barthes.

structuralism attacked.[6] This, after all, was the accusation leveled by Marx and Engels in their polemics against the anarchists of their day — notably Bakunin and Max Stirner (1806–1856).[7] It is ironic indeed, then, to encounter the same claim being leveled over 150 years after the fact by poststructuralist anarchists.

Be that as it may, "classical" anarchism offers some promising avenues for exploration, as a brief examination of anarchist theory and practice in Moscow during the Russian Revolution (1917–1921) reveals. From its founding in 1917 until its untimely demise, the locus of anarchist activity in Russia's capital was the Moscow Federation of Anarchist Groups. The Federation was founded in March 1917 after the Russian Tsar's abdication and eventually dissolved around 1919 due to repeated attacks (raids, arrests, etc.) by the Communist government under Lenin's leadership.[8] During its short existence, the Federation's secretary, Lev Chernyi, was the organization's leading theorist. Chernyi expounded an "associational" anarchism based on Max Stirner's anti-statist manifesto, *The Ego and Its Own* (1848), and this brand of anarchism was also discussed in the Federation's newspaper, *Anarkhiia*.[9] Given its importance for many in the Federation, therefore, Stirner's *The Ego and Its Own* merits close reading.

Stirner's thesis is that anarchist liberation could only be accomplished if all habitual subservience to metaphysical concepts and social norms ended and each unique individual became egoistic — that is, self-determining and value-creating. Anti-statism, Stirner argued, was an inescapable facet of egoism because when the individual achieved "self-realization of value from himself" he inevitably came to a "self-consciousness against the state" and its oppressive laws and regulations (361). The criminalization of society's outlaws was the state's response to those who asserted their desires over the sanction of morality, law, and authoritarian forms of power (314–19). Every state formation — monarchical, democratic, socialist or communist — demanded subservience to abstract principles in a bid to exert power over the subject. Stirner wrote:

> Political liberty means that the *polis*, the state, is free; freedom of religion [means] that religion is free, as freedom of conscience signifies that conscience is free; not, therefore, that I am free from the state, from religion, from conscience, or that I am rid of them. It does not mean my liberty, but the liberty of a power that rules and subjugates me; it means that one of my despots, like state, religion, conscience, is free. (139)

Stirner posited that an anarchist social order would be based on voluntary associations ("unions") of "egoists" acting co-operatively (414–15). Regarding the Federation from this perspective, we can begin by noting that it grew by bringing disparate groups together to "unionize"

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[6] On the anti-humanist subject and poststructuralism see Callinicos, 62–91.

[7] The anarchist theory of the individual is critiqued at length in chapter three of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels's polemic, *The German Ideology*, written between 1845–1846 and published posthumously. See Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, "Saint Max," *Collected Works: Vo1. 5* (New York: International Publishers, 1976), 117–452.

[8] On the founding of the Federation see Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists*, 179. The Communists were relentless in their attacks on the anarchists. Avrich writes that the cycle of arrests, executions, and imprisonments of anarchists intensified in 1919, and that by 1920 the "dragnet had swept the entire country," effectively crushing the anarchist movement. Paul Avrich, ed., *The Anarchists in the Russian Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Paperbacks, 1973), 138. Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists*, 177.

[9] Chernyi's book on "Associational Anarchism" includes two chapters dealing with anarchist egoism and collectivism; Lev Chernyi, *Novoe Napravlenie v Anarkhizme: Asosiatsionnii Anarkhism* (Moscow: 1907; 2nd ed., New York,

on a foundation of shared criminality. Its headquarters, "The House of Anarchy," was the old civic Merchants' Club, "confiscated" and communalized in March, 1917. From there it expanded spontaneously as anarchists organized themselves into clubs, joined the Federation, and began contributing to the collective welfare. By way of furthering mutual aid within the Federation, detachments of "Black Guards" continued to carry out expropriations — building occupations in the main — into the spring of 1918 (Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists*, 179–80; 184–85). In April, 1918, these activities would serve as the excuse for Lenin's Communist government to conduct a series of police raids against the Federation. The official goal was to arrest and charge "robber bands" in the anarchist ranks — an assertion of the power of the Communist state over anarchist direct action — but the authorities quickly expanded the scope of illegality, announcing that "entire counter-revolutionary groups" had joined the Federation with the aim of "some covert action against Soviet [government] power" (Antliff, 200). Following this logic, smashing the organizational structure of the state's most determined opponents "just happened" to go hand-in-hand with law enforcement. From an anarchist perspective, of course, the raids were tantamount to "executing" freedom, to paraphrase the editors of the anarchist Burevestnik (The Petrel) (ibid.) Certainly they underlined the stark contrast between the anarchist exercise of social power and state power in its Marxist guise. After the attack in Moscow and similar raids in St. Petersburg, the legality of anarchist activity was subject to the whims of the state police and the Cheka. Criminalization effectively brought an end to anarchism as an above-ground movement within territories controlled by the Communist Party, and the last instance of libertarian-inspired resistance in March, 1921 — an uprising of workers, soldiers and sailors at the Island Fortress of Kronstadt — was destined to be put down in "an orgy of blood-letting."[10]

The Ego and Its Own singled out the proletariat — the "unstable, restless, changeable" individuals who owe nothing to the state or capitalism — as the one segment of society capable of solidarity with those "intellectual vagabonds" who approached the condition of anarchistic egoism (Stirner, 148–49). Liberation for the proletariat did not lie in their consciousness of themselves as a class, as Marx claimed. It would only come if the workers embraced the egotistic attitude of the "vagabond" and shook off the social and moral conventions that yoked them to an exploitive order. Once the struggle for a new, stateless order was underway, the vastness of the working class ensured the bourgeoisie's defeat. "If labor becomes free," Stirner concluded, "the state is lost" (152).

This class orientation was reflected in the makeup of the Federation's clubs and communes, most of which were located in Moscow's working class districts (Avrich, 1967, 180). Indeed, the Federation's conceptualization of free individuality was indebted to Stirner's theory of class (an issue that falls by the wayside in much poststructuralist thinking) (Callinicos, 121–162). Among Moscow's anarchists, A.L. and V.L. Gordin distinguished themselves in this regard. The Gordins were arch-materialists who argued that religion and science were social creations, not eternal truths. *Manifest Pananarkhistov* (Pan-anarchist Manifesto), a collection published in 1918, opened with the following declaration:

> The rule of heaven and the rule of nature — angels, spirits, devils, molecules, atoms,
> ether, the laws of God-heaven and the laws of Nature, forces, the influence of one

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1923).

[10] The uprising lasted 18 days and was put down at a cost of approximately 10,000 dead, wounded or missing on

body on another — all this is invented, formed, created by society. (Gordinii 5–7, cited in Avrich, 1967, 177–78)

Here the Gordins took a page from Stirner, who condemned metaphysics and dismissed the idea of absolute truth as a chimera. Stirner argued that the metaphysical thinking underpinning religion and the notions of absolute truth that structured a wide range of theories laid the foundation for the hierarchical division of society into those with knowledge and those without. From here a whole train of economic, social and political inequalities ensued, all of which were antithetical to anarchist egoism. The egoist, he countered, recognized no metaphysical realms or absolute truths separate from experience; "knowledge," therefore, was ever-changing and varied from individual to individual (Stirner, 421). The Gordins agreed, arguing that the individualistic "inventiveness" of the working class made for a sharp contrast with the "abstract reasoning" of the bourgeoisie and its "criminal dehumanization" of the individual (Gordinii 28, cited in Avrich, 1967, 178).[11]

Stirner also drew distinctions between insurrection and revolution, reasoning that whereas revolutions simply changed who was in power, insurrection signaled a refusal to be subjugated and a determination to assert egoism over abstract power repeatedly, as an anarchic state of being. "The insurgent," wrote Stirner, "strives to be constitutionless," a formulation that the program of the Moscow Federation put into practice (ibid.) Autonomous self-governance, voluntary federation, the spread of power horizontally — these were the features of its insurgency. As a result, wherever the Federation held sway, power remained fluid, unbounded by central authority, and ever-creative in its manifestations.

No wonder the state-enamored Communists felt compelled to stamp it out. They saw themselves as the vanguard disciplinarians of the proletariat, building socialism by molding the masses under the aegis of state dictatorship. As Lenin put it during the assault on Kronstadt:

> Marxism teaches … that only the political party of the working class i.e., the Communist Party, is capable of uniting, training, and organizing a vanguard of the proletariat and of the whole mass of the working people … and of guiding all the united activities of the whole of the proletariat, i.e., of leading it politically, and through it, the whole mass of the working people. (Lenin 1921, 327)

Ever vigilant, "the dictatorship of the proletariat" was established to combat the "inevitable petty-bourgeois vacillations of this mass" towards anarchism during the initial revolutionary upheaval and to create a socialist society in its aftermath (ibid., 326–27). The "practical work of building new forms of economy" required a state, Lenin reasoned (328), because whenever and wherever "petty-bourgeois anarchy" reared its head, "iron rule government that is revolutionarily bold, swift, and ruthless" had to repress it (Lenin 1918, 291). And repress it, it did.

Complementing the power of social insurrectionism, Stirnerist egoism also called for our psychological empowerment through the cultivation of a critical consciousness that would, metaphorically, devour oppression. In *the Ego and its Own* Stirner deemed belief in a transcendent unchanging ego to be an alienating form of self-oppression. Libertarian "egoism," Stirner

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the Soviet side. No reliable estimate of Kronstadt deaths exists, but it was substantial. See Paul Avrich, *Kronstadt 1921* (New York: Norton, 1974), 211.

[11] Stirner argued that the privileged "cultured" segments of society distinguished themselves from the downtrod-

wrote, "is not that the ego is all, but the ego destroys all. Only the self-dissolving ego … the — finite ego, is really I. [The philosopher] Fichte speaks of the "absolute" ego, but I speak of me, the transitory ego" (237). Much like Kropotkin's moralizing anarchist, the liberated egoist's "free, unruly sensuality" overflowed with ideas — "I am not a mere thought, but at the same time I am full of thoughts" — a fecund multiplicity that defied absolutes (453). Stirner characterized the internalization of authoritarian psychology as a mode of self-forgetting, a desire to escape the corporeal that found ultimate expression in the otherworldly delusions of immortality prescribed by Christianity (451–53). The liberated ego, on the other hand, would never subordinate itself to an abstract truth because it was conscious of its finitude and gained power from this knowledge. Stirner argued,

> 'Absolute thinking' is that thinking which forgets that it is my thinking, that I think, and that it exists only through me. But I, as I, swallow up again what is mine, am its master; it is only my opinion, which I can at any moment change, i.e.; annihilate, take back into myself, and consume. (453)

The consuming impulses of liberated egoism left nothing sacrosanct. As Stirner put it, "there exists not even one truth, not right, not freedom, humanity, etc., that has stability before me, and to which I subject myself. They are words, nothing but words" (463). He concludes:

> I am the owner of my might, and I am so when I know myself as unique. In the unique one the owner himself returns into his creative nothing, out of which he is born. Every higher essence above me, be it God, be it human, weakens the feeling of my uniqueness, and pales before the sun of this consciousness. If I concern myself for myself, the unique one, then my concern rests on its transitory, mortal creator, who consumes himself, and I may say: I have set my affair on nothing. (490)

Russian anarchism's engagement with the psychological dimensions of Stirner's theory has barely been documented, and the historical and theoretical threads are too complex to recapitulate here.[12] For now it will suffice to note that during the movement's last bid for power in March, 1921, the rebels at Kronstadt issued two statements, "What We Fight For" and "Socialism in Quotation Marks," protesting not only against political and economic oppression, but also against "the moral servitude which the Communists have inaugurated" as they "laid their hands also on the inner world of the toilers, forcing them to think in the Communist way."[13] While state power grew;

> The life of the citizen became hopelessly monotonous and routine. One lived according to timetables established by the powers that be. Instead of the free development of the individual personality and a free labouring life, there emerged an extraordinary and unprecedented slavery… Such is the shining kingdom of socialism to which the dictatorship of the Communist Party has brought us.[14]

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den "uncultured" on the basis of supposed superior knowledge (94–95).

[12] I discuss the artistic dimensions of this issue in *Art and Anarchy: From the Paris Commune to the Fall of the Berlin Wall* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2007).

[13] "What We Fight For" (March 8, 1921) in Avrich, *Kronstadt 1921*, 241.

[14] "Socialism in Quotation Marks" (March 16, 1921) in Avrich, *Kronstadt 1921*, 245.

Anarchist subjectivity was a threat to the regime because freedom was, and is, its essence.

To conclude, the history of the Russian Revolution makes abundantly clear that "classical" anarchism does have a positive theory of power. Not only that, it offers an alternative ground for theorizing the social conditions of freedom and a critical understanding of power and liberation as perpetually co-mingling with and inscribed by a process of self-interrogation and self-overcoming that is pluralistic, individualist, materialist, and social. Finally, it has the advantage of an historical record: this theory has been put into practice, sometimes on a mass scale.

Arguably, then, contemporary radicals would do better marshaling classical anarchism to interrogate poststructuralism, rather than the other way around. As it stands, the continual rehashing of May's spurious characterizations in a bid to theorize "beyond" anarchism has merely set up a false God adjective, poststructuralism, at the price of silencing the ostensive subject.

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