

# What is Postanarchism "Post"?

Review of Saul Newman, *From Bakunin to Lacan: Anti-Authoritarianism and the Dislocation of Power*

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Newly resurgent anarchist movements, shaking the streets from Seattle to Genoa, are caught in a field of tension between two magnetic poles: Eugene, Oregon, and Plainfield, Vermont. Eugene is the home of John Zerzan, author of *Future Primitive* (1994), who has pushed anarchist theory in the direction of an all-encompassing negation of "civilization." At the Institute for Social Ecology in Plainfield in 1995, Murray Bookchin issued his much debated challenge to the "anti-civilizational" anarchists, *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism: An Unbridgeable Chasm*. Bookchin's "social anarchism" is in the tradition of the anarcho-communism theorized by Peter Kropotkin, calling for the replacement of nations and markets with a decentralized federation of self-managing communities. Zerzan's "primitivism" calls for the destruction of the "totality," including the abolition of technology, language, and history itself, in favor of a wild, primordial freedom (*Future Primitive* 129).<sup>1</sup> The "chasm" between Eugene and Plainfield is wide, certainly. Zerzan and Bookchin agree on one thing, however: both hate postmodernism.

Bookchin calls it a form of "nihilism" tailored to "yuppie" tastes (19). "Postmodernism leaves us hopeless in an unending mall," Zerzan complains, "without a living critique; nowhere" (134). For Bookchin, theorists such as Foucault and Derrida simulate a kind of individualistic rebellion while vitiating social anarchist commitments to reason, realism, and ethical universals (9-10). For Zerzan, on the contrary, they bolster the reigning order by liquidating any notion of the autonomous individual: "the postmodern subject, what is presumably left of subject-hood, seems to be mainly the personality constructed by and for technological capital" (110).

This dispute is one of the significant contexts in which Saul Newman's *From Bakunin to Lacan: Anti-Authoritarianism and the Dislocation of Power* arrives. Another is the rediscovery by the academy of the anarchist theoretical tradition, where until recently anarchism had endured an official oblivion even longer and deeper than its erasure from public memory. The rediscovery of anarchist theory is a timely gift for theorists such as Todd May (*The Political Philosophy of Post-structuralist Anarchism*, 1994), who are eager to politicize poststructuralism but leery of bolting their concepts onto ready-made Marxist frameworks. Both May and Newman see Marxism, in all its varieties, as an ineluctably "strategic" philosophy (to use May's term), perpetually drawn to the postulate of a "center" from which power must emanate (May 7; 10).

"In contrast to Marxism," writes Newman, "anarchism was revolutionary in analyzing power in its own right, and exposing the place of power in Marxism itself—its potential to reaffirm state authority" (6). Mikhail Bakunin and Karl Marx tore the First International asunder in 1872 over the question of the State: was it a mere instrument of ruling-class power, as Marx thought, in which case it could be seized and used by the proletariat, or was it an "autonomous and independent institution with its own logic of domination," as Bakunin argued, in which case any "transitional" State would merely constitute a new reigning regime (Newman 21)? History has given a poignant weight to Bakunin's premonitions of a "red bureaucracy," of course, but for a poststructuralist rereading, his importance lies in his challenge to Marx's method—the "strategic thinking" for which "all problems can be reduced to the basic one" (May 10). Anarchist critique undermines the confident assumption that power is merely an "epiphenomenon of the capitalist economy or class relations," which in turn opens the way to a post-Foucauldian apprehension of the ubiquity of power relations—the "dispersed, decentered" power which comes from everywhere (Newman 2; 78).

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<sup>1</sup> See Zerzan's *Elements of Refusal*, particularly chapters 1-5, for the full extent of his "anti-civilizational" project.

At the same time, Newman and May concur, classical anarchism ditches its own best insight: "anarchism itself falls into the trap of the place of power" (Newman 6). Both Bakunin and Kropotkin found resistance on a certain notion of human nature as an "outside" to power—a pure origin of resistance. Power, as incarnated in the State, represses and distorts the goodness of humanity; once it is eradicated by the revolution, "human essence will flourish" and power will disappear (Newman 13). For Newman, however, power is ineradicable, and any essentialist notion of "human nature" is the basis for a new domination.

From the diagnosis, the prescription: for anarchism to become meaningful once again, it must be detached from its investment in essentialist conceptions of power and human identity, made to face the reality that power is everywhere. But how to do so while avoiding the gloomy conclusion that because power is everywhere, resistance is nowhere? If "resistance to power cannot be conceptualized without thinking in terms of an outside to power," how can this "outside" be thought without resorting to yet another equally foundationalist theory of "the place of power" (97)? Overcoming this "logical impasse" is the task Newman sets for himself in the following chapters, as he scours the resources of poststructuralism for "a non-essentialist notion of the Outside" (6).

But what does Newman mean by "power" when he seeks its "Outside"? It's not always clear what Newman means by this key term. Throughout the book, he seems to engage in a certain code-switching—sometimes conscious and clearly marked, sometimes surreptitious or unconscious—alternating between at least two senses of the word. In the first chapter, Newman alerts us to the possibility of confusion; while thus far he has used "power," "domination," and "authority" as synonyms, "by the time we get to Foucault, 'power' and 'domination' have somewhat different meanings," and often Newman seems to follow Foucault in defining "power" as "inevitable in any society," while characterizing "domination" as "something to be resisted." At other times, he retains the definition of "power" as "domination" (12). Leaving this ambiguity open weakens the argument that follows.

A second weakness stems from a misreading of classical anarchist theory. Newman's argument is premised, in the first place, on his reading of Bakunin and Kropotkin as wedded to the notion that the human subject is naturally opposed to "power." He then notes that they also have recourse to a characterization of this human subject as fatally prone to "a 'natural' desire for power." From this, he draws the conclusion that classical anarchism is riven by a fundamental inconsistency, a "hidden contradiction" (48-9). The unstated assumption which warrants this move from premise to conclusion is that these two representations of the human subject are mutually exclusive—that Bakunin and Kropotkin cannot possibly intend both.

This assumption should raise the question: why not? A close reading of Bakunin and Kropotkin would more strongly support a different conclusion—that for both of these thinkers, the human subject itself, and not their representation of the subject, is the site of what Kropotkin calls a "fundamental contradiction" between "two sets of diametrically opposed feelings which exist in man" (22). In other words, as Dave Morland has explained, these thinkers' "conception of human nature" is not statically unified, but dialectically "double-barreled": human beings are possessed of equal potentials for "sociability" and "egoism" (12). Since neither of these potentials is necessarily more likely to be expressed than the other, *ceteris paribus*, neither constitutes a species destiny: "history is autonomous" (21).

The (arguably mistaken) discovery of a "hidden contradiction" at the core of anarchist discourse prompts Newman's fear that classical anarchism is dangerously open to the potential for

domination, which in turn forms the rationale for the rest of his project. Errors propagate through this system, as the logic of an undertheorized "anti-essentialism" prompts him to ask the wrong questions and get the wrong answers, or to ask the right questions without looking for answers at all. If "humans have an essential desire for power," Newman argues, "then how can one be sure that a revolution aimed at destroying power will not turn into a revolution aimed at capturing power? How can one be sure, in other words, that an anarchist revolution will be any different from a Marxist vanguard revolution?" (49).

There are a number of problems with this question. First of all, depending on which version of "power" Newman is referring to, the question may depend on a false assumption. If "power" as an endless play of mutual influence, action, and reaction is distinguished from "domination," then neither Bakunin nor Kropotkin have any pretensions about "destroying power" per se. Indeed, to a surprising extent, both are aware of the ubiquity of "social power," which no revolution can (nor should) abolish; both understand that it is a "natural" product of human subjects, rather than an artificial imposition from outside; and both distinguish it from force, coercion, or domination, while acknowledging its potential to generate these effects, particularly when it is allowed to accrete (Bakunin, *God and the State* 43n).

Apart from its problematic premise, however, Newman's question is also needlessly framed as merely rhetorical or unanswerable, when it really does admit of an answer in political practice. Anarchist practices, conditioned by a theoretical emphasis on the immanence of ends within means, are distinguished from those of "a Marxist vanguard revolution" by the insistence that the immediate form of revolution (direct action, direct democracy, egalitarian self-management, the leaderless group, etc.) be its future content. Thus the anarcho-syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World union named as their project "forming the structure of the new society within the shell of the old" (Renshaw, *frontispiece*).

Newman, however, focuses more on theory than on practice. And this is why he fails to ask the following question: if classical anarchist theory is so wedded to this notion of the natural harmony of human subjects in society, why is it so deeply preoccupied with questions of action and organization? Why bother to organize, to intervene, unless something is in need of this intervention, i.e. unless it is disorganized? In fact, these theorists do not regard anarchy as something merely spontaneous, natural, biological, given, but as something that had to be evoked, elicited, created, made from the materials of history and biology. What "every individual inherits at birth," according to Bakunin, is "not ideas and innate sentiments, as the idealists claim, but only the capacity to feel, to will, to think, and to speak"—a set of "rudimentary faculties without any content"; this content must be supplied by the social milieu (Bakunin 240-41). Nature is a set of potentials, not a telos; social construction is the determining factor. In this sense, classical anarchist theory goes beyond the binary opposition of essentialism/non-essentialism.

Rather than dwelling on the ostensible limitations of anarchism as articulated by its most influential theorists, Newman turns his attention to what he sees as the untapped potential of a relatively marginal figure in anarchist history: Max Stirner, the fellow "Young Hegelian" whom Marx so viciously assails in *The German Ideology*. In his 1845 *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* (variously translated as "The Ego and His Own" or "The Unique One and Its Property"), Stirner uses the stick of nominalism to beat every philosophy built on abstract ideals or categories, including not only the religious submission to God but also the fetishization of "Man" in liberalism and communism: "no concept expresses me, nothing that is designated as my essence exhausts me; they are only names" (490). The self in Stirner is a subject to which all "predicates" are merely

properties, so that it cannot be said to have an identity or essence (450)—leaving, as Newman sees it, ‘a radical opening which the individual can use to create his own subjectivity,’ unhampered by essentialisms.

This proto-Nietzschean insight excites Newman: “The importance of Stirner’s notion of becoming for politics, particularly poststructuralist politics, is great indeed: he has shown that resistance to power will never succeed if it remains trapped within fixed, essential identities” (68). Ultimately, Stirner provides Newman with a non-essentialist account of how the self, rather than encountering a power which is imposed upon it, actually produces the power to which it submits by binding itself to “fixed ideas” (ideologies and essentialist identities) and annuls this power by dissolving these abstract chains through analysis (Newman 64).

Newman does consider the charge, leveled at Stirner by numerous anarchist critics, that Stirner’s “unique one,” abstracted from all history, disembedded from every relationship, and detached from all context, simply constitutes a new “essentialist identity” (and a mystified one at that) but he does not really spell out why this critique is mistaken (71). Not only does the *Einzig* closely resemble Sartre’s classless, genderless, cultureless, ahistorical cogito a little too closely—it also bears some resemblance to the protagonist of laissez-faire marketplace economics, the Rational Actor, whose infinite desire and arbitrary caprice (i.e. “selfishness”) are likewise purported to be the very measure of freedom.

None of this prevents Newman from moving forward with his project—the reconstruction of anarchist theory within a poststructuralist framework. Four chapters provide a creative, suggestive, and relatively accessible rereading of work by Foucault, Deleuze, Guattari, Derrida, and Lacan as Newman searches for a “non-essentialist notion of the Outside.” Foucauldian genealogy and Deleuzo-Guattarian schizoanalysis extend Stirner’s insight into the abstract nature of the State, “whose formidable omnipresence exists mostly in our minds and in our subconscious desire to be dominated,” by demonstrating that “the individual represses himself,” and that “we subordinate ourselves to signifying regimes all around us” (79; 83; 100). Derridean deconstruction adds a “strategy” for “undermining the metaphysical authority of various political and philosophical discourses,” releasing action from its obligation to any “founding principle” or *arché* (130). In the end, Newman stakes his money on Lacan as presenting the most persuasive “non-essentialist figure of resistance” (111).

Here, I suspect, will lie one of the primary points of interest for readers of poststructuralist theory, as Newman draws on Lacan’s account of how “the subject is constituted through its fundamental inability to recognize itself in the symbolic order” to explain how this apparently omnipresent and omnipotent order creates its own other—its own utopia, actually: a non-originary origin or “nonplace” (*ou-topos*) of resistance, blossoming in the heart of power itself (139). This nonplace is the “leftover” which is continually and necessarily generated by the operation of “the Law,” which “produces its own transgression” (140; 144). In effect, Newman uses Lacan to clarify what Foucault seemed to have left mysterious—the logic whereby power never appears without resistance appearing as well.

But wait—isn’t this a little too close to Bakunin’s declaration, which Newman cites as evidence of his “essentialism,” that “there is something in the nature of the state which provokes rebellion” (qtd. in Newman 48)? If Newman argues that these two antagonists, the “state” which provokes and the “subject” who rebels, could not “exist without each other” (48), how can he avoid concluding that this goes double for the Lacanian struggle between the constitutive “Law” and the “transgression” it produces? Moreover, one might ask what it has meant to discover this “concept”

or "figure" if what anarchism opposes is not "power" but "domination." Was the quest in vain? Has all of this culminated in yet another insurgent subject which just can't seem to do without the power that dominates it?

These important questions remain unresolved. More important for anarchist readers, however, is the question of what practical consequences might ensue from the "postanarchism" which Newman formulates in his final chapter (157). How can a politics, which presupposes cooperation and joint action, found itself on Stirner's notion that my unique ego has literally nothing in common with yours? Newman calls attention to Stirner's proposal for a "union of egoists," a merely voluntary and instrumental association between individuals, as opposed to a "community" which one is "forced" to participate in (70), but this amounts to a universalization of the instrumentalist logic of capitalism: "For me," Stirner writes, "no one is a person to be respected, not even the fellow-man, but solely, like other beings, an object in which I take an interest or else do not, an interesting or uninteresting object, a usable or unusable person" (414-15). Indeed, for Stirner, "we have only one relation to each other, that of usability, of utility, of use"; everything else is ideology (394). While Newman wants to read Stirner as "not necessarily against the notion of community itself" (70), it is hard to avoid the conclusion that Stirner himself flatly declares: "community . . . is impossible" (414). This is precisely the hyper-individualism that placed Stirner outside the mainstream of the anarchist movement, which remained committed to community and collective practice, constituting itself as "social anarchism" rather than mere individualism. "Needless to say," Newman admits in a footnote, "some modern anarchists do not exactly embrace this postmodern logic of uncertainty and dislocation" (175 n7).

In any case, it's a relief to find someone willing to think seriously about the political outside of the confines of Marxism, rather than continually fiddling around with Marxist texts in yet another attempt to take Marx beyond Marx (as Antonio Negri has put it) or else completely scrapping that urge to "change the world" in favor of some ironic or nihilistic embrace of the world as it is (the Baudrillard solution). Post-Marxist theorists have stripped away one key concept after another (historical stages, centrality of class conflict, "progressive" colonial/ecocidal teleology, productivism, materiality/ideality binary, ideology, alienation, totality, etc.), peeling away the layers of the onion, driving Marxism further and further in the direction of its old repressed Other, anarchism—protesting all the while that "we are not anarchists" (Hardt and Negri 350).

As refreshing as it is to step outside this endless Marxist monster movie, with its perennial Frankfurian pronouncements of death, periodic Frankensteinian re-animations, and perpetual "spectres," I would argue that anarchism has more to offer poststructuralism than Newman and May seem to recognize, and that poststructuralism affords other and better resources for the development of anarchist theory than their example would imply. In fact, it could do much to redress the damage done to the core ethos of social anarchism, as cataloged by Bookchin, by post-1960s theoretical tendencies which regard all structure, organization, and coherence as repressive. It offers a weapon for the Plainfield social anarchists against the politically and intellectually sterile primitivism of Eugene.

Foucault's demonstration of the poverty of the "repressive hypothesis" and of the positive potential of self-structuring askesis could be used to neutralize the influence of left-Freudian theories of liberation as antisocial "de-repression" (Benello 63). The wisdom of Derrida's "there is nothing outside the text"—as Zerzan is well aware (116-17)—could be marshaled against the primitivist quest for a pure pre-social origin. Even Lacanian psychoanalysis, with its narrative of

the construction of the self in and through the Symbolic, could reinforce Bookchin's distinction between "individual autonomy" and "social freedom" (4).

From Bakunin to Lacan is overly eager to get from Bakunin to Lacan—a perhaps too uncritical teleological trajectory—but at least it inquires about the way from one point to the other, which is a significant contribution in itself. As anarchist movements, roused from their long slumber, attempt to orient themselves in a world of globalizing capitalism, sporadic ethno-religious violence, and growing ecological crisis, they will find themselves in need of more such contributions.

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