

Book Review: *The Politics of Postanarchism*

Leonard Williams*

Saul Newman, *The Politics of Postanarchism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 200 pp.

As we have come to expect from Saul Newman, this book is the latest in a series of efforts to highlight and explain the anarchist tendencies lurking within poststructuralist thought. Through a number of works tracing the affinity of anarchism and poststructuralism (notably, *From Bakunin to Lacan* and *Power and Politics in Poststructuralist Thought*), Newman has undoubtedly emerged as one of the foremost interpreters of the links between continental philosophy and radical politics. Committed to revealing the ethical and political implications of rejecting foundational approaches to theory and practice, Newman's project has come to an important juncture with this latest work. The primary challenge we confront, as well as the primary focus of this book, is "to think politics outside the state — to explore the constituent principles and ethical contours of a political space which seeks autonomy from the order of the state" (167).

Written with an exceptional clarity, Newman's effort "to affirm anarchism's place as the very horizon of radical politics" (2; original emphasis) involves both geographic and ontological explorations. Geographically, the concern is to locate the place that anarchism

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has in contemporary politics. At first glance, it appears to be simultaneously no place and a non-place. As a “recurring desire for life without government that haunts the political imagination” (1), any conception of anarchism that we might have seems to be little more than a spectre. As such, it lies just beyond our ken, outside the standard conceptions of politics rooted in power and authority, sovereignty and coercion. On a second take, moving from geography to ontology, anarchism is necessarily with us in those moments whenever insurrectionary challenges to authority arise. In this sense, anarchism may well be identified with the perpetual but intermittent spirit of revolt that has long animated any number of social and political movements — from democracy to socialism, from trade unionism to identity politics. We have to be careful, though, not to conceive of anarchism as merely the last refuge of tired radicals, ones who have grown weary of the struggles fought by previous generations. Instead, we are encouraged to see its proper place and configuration as a realm marked by ethical action and utopian dreams, a realm where thinkers and activists seek the simultaneous realization of equality and liberty (sometimes called “equaliberty”). Newman’s perspective, in other words, appears as a *postanarchism*.

What, then, is postanarchism? This question has been the subject of some debate among anarchist theorists and activists for some time now. To some thinkers and activists, the term suggests a new form of anarchism that simply says goodbye to all that — somewhat reminiscent of Bob Black’s work, Newman’s postanarchism bids a particularly eager goodbye to the stilted leftist heritage of the past. To others, the term indicates that radical politics should move to a new plane, should somehow go not only beyond leftism, but beyond anarchism itself. Whether postanarchism is seen as the latest intellectual fad or as the successor to the mantle of radicalism, one confronts this book with the minimal but important goal of making sense of the concept of postanarchism.

Newman takes up the task of explaining postanarchism in his typically capable and insightful way. Drawing on the several strains of poststructuralist thought — as well as ideas from both the (post-)Marxist, continental, and anarchist traditions — he clarifies the scope of postanarchism by engaging in any number of debates within contemporary political theory. You will find sections of the work discussing many of the usual suspects — dynamic theoretical duos such as Deleuze and Guattari, Hardt and Negri, along with Laclau and Mouffe; as well as assorted radical thinkers from Badiou

to Bookchin, from Zerzan to Žižek. Rather unlike the structure of some of his previous books, though, the reader will not find each chapter dedicated to interpreting and critiquing a particular theorist. Instead, this work seems very much like Newman's effort to come to terms with his philosophical conscience. We progress from classical anarchism to postanarchism through a series of moments that amount to a journey exploring possible paths to liberation. The goal is to describe, or (better) to suggest, how we might emerge out of our willing subjection and psychic attachment to power. Newman's rather utopian project, like that of anarchism itself, is thus "to provide a point of alterity or exteriority as a way of interrogating the limits of this [i.e., the existing] order" (7).

In other words, postanarchist theory endeavours to solve the ultimate riddle of power — how to resist or revolt against it without reproducing its structures of domination in another form. Postanarchism, while aiming to provide a path toward genuine emancipation, begins by questioning the epistemological and ontological foundations of the state and capitalism. In laying out this critique, postanarchism cannot depend upon the foundational ideas supplied by essentialism and humanism — the very sort of presuppositions that characterize not only the Enlightenment thought at the heart of modern radicalism, but also major strands of the anarchist tradition itself. To be utopian, in Newman's sense, does not mean realizing some intellectually constructed blueprint of the good society; rather, it means discovering the key features of the future society amid practices of the present one. Poststructural utopianism acknowledges the revolutionary potential in everyday actions, in the molecular or localized forms of resistance that occur whenever and wherever power operates (64–6).

What kind of politics then is anticipated by postanarchist theory? In Newman's phrase, postanarchism constitutes an anti-politics, that is, an anti-political politics. It is a revolutionary enterprise that suspects representation and rejects the state. In sketching the origins of such a politics, Newman begins with a recapitulation of the arguments waged between Marxists and anarchists over the state, the party, and revolution. Even post-Marxist ideas of hegemony and agonistic pluralism, though ostensibly aimed at emancipation, fail to get beyond the framework imposed by the political logic of state sovereignty. As a result, postanarchism seeks "to conceive of a space for politics outside and against the state, and to see politics as an

activity through which the principle of state sovereignty is radically questioned and disputed” (103).

At this point, few anarchists would have any hesitation about subscribing to Newman’s analysis. Few, indeed, do not relish the chance to rehash the longstanding quarrels with Marxism in any form. From his encounter with Marxism and post-Marxism, Newman moves to elucidate the connections that link postanarchism with contemporary radical thought and continental philosophy. The aim of his review, once again, is to situate the postanarchist approach as one that rejects the Manichean tendencies found in classical anarchist thought (tendencies that Newman artfully diagnosed in *Power and Politics in Poststructuralist Thought*). Where traditional anarchists oppose the natural to the artificial and the social to the political, postanarchists seek an escape from that binary opposition. The emancipatory question is not how to seize state power, as the Marxists would have it; nor is it simply how to abolish the state in one go, as classical anarchists would have it. Rather, the crux of the matter concerns “how one should build a politics which, in its very existence, presupposes the radical dissolution of the statist imaginary” (111–12). Postanarchism thus tries to map a new territory, a space that lies between the social and the political – while rejecting the essentialist claims long made about both domains. In this new terrain, postanarchism rejects both the notion that emancipation is immanent within capitalist development and the idea that some spontaneous event will usher in an era of undiminished liberation.

For Newman, contemporary anarchism rightly drops a lot of the political and intellectual baggage from the past. Traditional leftist ties with particular labour or socialist movements are often set aside in favour of more diffuse anti-capitalist and egalitarian affinities. Enlightenment conceptions of human nature and reason drop away in favour of non-foundational, poststructuralist ontologies. Skepticism toward meta-narratives, abandonment of essential identities, emphasis on language and discourse, and a concept of constitutive power are the central poststructuralist insights that Newman believes should now guide anarchist politics (140–2). Postanarchism takes these insights as points of departure (lines of flight, perhaps?) from the traditional categories of radical thought. Democracy no longer connotes a stable set of parliamentary institutions nor should it refer to a type of collective decision making. For Newman, following Rancière, democracy must be conceived as a politics of disjuncture. To the extent that contemporary anarchism destabilizes

the “ontological foundations and essential identities” of traditional anarchism, so postanarchism becomes “an ethics in which power is continually problematised, and where borders are continually contested” (151). Dissent and disagreement, then, are inevitable within political life — and, presumably, within anarchism itself. In postanarchism, “the emphasis is on contingency and practical innovation, rather than on understanding the organic basis and the rational *telos* of the story of human liberation” (153; original emphasis). Foundational principles of action drawn from revolutionary theory or modern social science must give way to a politics rooted in localized practices and pervasive contingencies.

Just as poststructuralism is a philosophy without foundations, so postanarchism is a politics without guarantees. We can no longer place our bets on a proletariat becoming progressively class-conscious or spontaneously engaging in revolutionary action. We can no longer take for granted the inevitable demise of the capitalist mode of production through the dialectical unfolding of communist society. We simply cannot assume that the better natures of human beings will be liberated, and then, expressed in such a way that power and domination need not be a concern any longer.

The imaginary of classical anarchism was one which opposed pure nature to corrupt convention, which sought the liberation of society from the shackles of the state. In Newman’s understanding of postanarchism, “the political is the constitutive space *between* society and the state” (169; original emphasis) — neither pole of that opposition is privileged; neither can colonize or win over the other. Radical politics thus appears as “a series of struggles, movements and communities whose existence is often fragile, whose practices are experimental, tentative and localised and whose continuity is by no means guaranteed” (170). The challenge is to develop and employ non-authoritarian organizations in the service of such non-representative or democratic goals as “equaliberty.”

There seems to me to be no question that *The Politics of Postanarchism* is essential reading for anyone seeking to understand postanarchism. Its theoretical problems and concerns are expertly described and explored. Its sources in poststructuralist thought, its affinities with continental philosophy, and its links to both classical and contemporary anarchism are well summarized and fairly interpreted. Whatever criticisms of the book one might have do not emerge from the scholarship or analysis it presents, they emerge instead from what the work leaves unsaid or little explored.

Newman's understanding of postanarchism is largely elucidated through contrast. We learn, for example, that it does not share the Manichean, even reductionist assumptions of classical anarchism. We learn that postanarchism rejects both the essentialist ontology of Enlightenment thought and the rationalist prescriptions found in the Marxist tradition. Because of its non-foundational, contingent nature, though, it is not surprising that Newman does not entirely succeed when it comes to giving postanarchism any positive content. We know where to find postanarchism at work – in the space between society and state – but we do not quite know if it could be identified on sight. We might be able to pick it out of a line-up, but perhaps could not find it among the crowds on the streets. Some positive content for postanarchism can be found in the ideal of equal liberty, a key notion for Newman; but for the most part, the concept is defined in straightforward, minimalist, even self-evident terms. It just is not discussed in any significant detail. To the extent that postanarchism appears as a utopianism, it would help us all to know a bit more about the direction in which we should head.

As one absorbs Newman's arguments, it is rather easy to come to the belief that postanarchism is now central to the emancipatory project. Its ontological assumptions and theoretical tools certainly provide an important means for thinking about the possibilities of radical politics. Even so, it is not entirely clear just what is to be done as a result of taking its ontology to heart. In general, when Newman talks about matters of anarchist practice, he most often does so in the context of making theoretical claims about the contours of ethics, though in the concluding chapter, he tries to highlight some concrete examples of postanarchist political activity. Even so, the best he can do is to make admittedly common gestures in the direction of "the decentralised, democratic and non-authoritarian structures and practices involved in what is broadly termed the global anti-capitalist movement" (168). Perhaps the next step in elucidating a postanarchist account of emancipation is to talk not only about specific structures and practices, but to theorize about how it is possible for the critical consciousness on which they depend to emerge in the first place.

Anarchism, as an anti-politics, has typically been marginalized or kept to the outer limits of political theory. Because of this position on the fringe, Newman suggests, anarchism "has something important to say about the nature of the political" (181). That significant contribution is what makes anarchism worthy of further study,

practice, and development; indeed, it is what makes Newman's work inherently valuable. Even so, contemporary anarchism (whether post- or not) remains a largely aspirational doctrine. Perhaps saying something important about the political is less noteworthy than inspiring important political work. If so, then postanarchism — anarchism conceived as a contingent radicalism — must necessarily be understood as an anarchism-to-come.

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