

For Judith Malina

Introduction

Jesse Cohn* and Nathan Jun*

“There are a million different ways to define ‘modernity,’” warns David Graeber.¹ Anthony Giddens defines it in terms of “(1) a certain set of attitudes towards the world, the idea of the world as open to transformation by human intervention; (2) a complex of economic institutions, especially industrial production and a market economy; (3) [and] a certain range of political institutions, including the nation-state and mass democracy.”² This immediately suggests why anarchists might have some powerfully ambivalent responses to modernity. Critics of industrial technology are particularly sensitive to the potentially ecocidal aspects of “transformation by human intervention”: Lawrence Cahoon emphasizes the importance, within modern civilization, not only of “capitalism, a largely secular culture, liberal democracy, individualism, rationalism, humanism” but also “new machine technologies and modes of industrial production that have led to an unprecedented rise in material living standards.”³ He adds by way of summary that:

The positive self-image modern Western culture has given to itself, a picture born in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, is of a civilization founded on scientific knowledge of the world and rational knowledge of value, which places the highest premium on individual human life and freedom, and believes that such freedom and rationality will lead to social progress through self-controlled work, creating a better material, intellectual, and political life for all.⁴

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Anarchist critics of imperialism and colonialism recognize this “positive self-image” and this narrative of “progress” as precisely the rationales proffered for military intervention in Afghanistan and the abduction of children from aboriginal families in Australia. At the same time, when Giddens speaks of a sense that the world is “open to transformation,” we can see why anarchists have often identified their aims as “modern”: if modernity “lives in the future rather than the past,” what could be more quintessentially modern than anarchism?⁵

But can modernity really be defined in terms of a set of distinctive traits which apply, by extension, to every paradigmatically ‘modern’ institution, or even to all of modern thought? Consider Marx, for example. Is he a technological determinist or a theorist of class struggle? A dialectical interactionist, or an economist of “the last instance”? What about Nietzsche? Would you care to denounce Nietzsche, the nihilist, or Nietzsche, the teacher of a “revaluation of all values”? A romantic, existentialist, or postmodern Nietzsche? Can you really cast away Freud for being a biological determinist when Freud, the discoverer of the social construction of the self, is knocking at the door (followed by a mob of other Freuds)? World-conquering texts and their dead authors’ ghosts tend to resist definitive dismissals: like Proteus, they keep changing shape just when you think you’ve wrestled them to the ground. The concepts of the ‘modern’ or ‘modernity’ and the ‘postmodern’ or ‘postmodernity’ exhibit a similar plasticity, a similar resilience (perhaps all the more so because they are not tied to just one canonical thinker). They are all the more difficult to come to grips with.

That doesn’t mean you can’t try to come to grips with them. The essays by Eduardo Colombo and Richard Cohen (translated by Jesse Cohn) gamely launch fresh attacks on postmodernism, conceived, on the one hand, as an abject surrender of the modern projects of reason and revolution, and on the other, as a slyly refurbished modernity seeking to forestall and disarm its own critique. Both, significantly, are strongly inspired by the work of Cornelius Castoriadis,⁶ *animateur* of the group Socialisme ou Barbarie (SoB), whose work (along with that of a fellow SoB, Guy Debord) marks the path not taken by some of the architects of postmodern theory – Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard,

also SoBs. At the risk of digression, it seems to us worth taking a moment to dwell on this intellectual genealogy.

In Todd May's seminal *Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism* (1994), it is Castoriadis who marks the farthest departure from Marx's "strategic" political thought - and hence the nearest approach to the kind of anarchism (or postanarchism) that May is constructing - while still remain[ing] within the confines, though a bit at the margins, of Marxist analysis."⁷ Castoriadis approaches anarchism most closely in his thorough rejection of Marxian technological determinism, famously declaring that "the final contradiction of capitalism" was not that between the forces and relations of production, but that between Capital's tendency to reduce workers to the status of machines and its need for workers' creative self-activity; this, in turn, broke the boundaries of the economistic class-struggle schema of "bourgeoisie" and "proletariat" in favor of a struggle between order-giving "directors" and order-following "executants,"⁸ identifying as potentially revolutionary agents "all those who have no control over their own lives."⁹ Clearly, this brought Castoriadis' radicalism nearer to old anarchist conceptions of a revolutionary agency called "the people" - a "complex and various" agency, as Daniel Colson emphasizes, "diverse in its functions, sexes, ages, trades, positions, histories," perpetually engaged in "the reproduction of society," but for this very reason capable of initiating its radical transformation.¹⁰

It is notable, however, that in pursuing this anarchist-tending development of a postmarxist theory, Castoriadis - the same Castoriadis who so eloquently denounces postmodernism as a defeatist "retreat from autonomy" - also attaches increasing importance to phenomena of language, signification, codes, and "the imaginary," explicitly borrowing, albeit in decidedly unorthodox ways, from Claude Lévi-Strauss and Jacques Lacan. It is not for nothing that Castoriadis has been identified as "prefigur[ing]" many "post-modern elements," if not postmodernism itself: not only the critique of "the intellectual or party as ruler-legislator," but "the jettisoning of the notion of history as progress, the rejection of the idea of a single and universal reason, and the emphasis on the instituted, historical specificity, and the priority of the political," as Chamsy el-Ojeili notes.¹¹ Indeed, many such features mark works such as Colombo's *Espace politique de l'anarchie*.¹²

How close, then, might Castoriadian anarchist critics of postmodernity be to something like Lewis Call's "postmodern anarchism"? Or, to reverse the question: to what extent might their anarchism itself be already postmodern? Might this complicate Call's own declaration of a clear and bright distinction between "postmodern anarchism" and "the merely modern anarchism of Bakunin and Kropotkin"?¹³

To all of this might be added the ongoing questioning of what, if anything, "postmodernism" (and thus, inevitably, "modernity") means today. Even if "modernity" is a meaningful shorthand, the range of political, social, economic, cultural, and intellectual developments it describes are inexorably bound up in their own contradictions and negations. One cannot speak of capitalism without also speaking of socialism (that other project for a transformation of the world); one cannot speak of the emancipatory potentials of technology or urbanization without also speaking of alienation; one cannot speak of secularization without also speaking of new religious movements, including fundamentalisms; and one cannot speak of progress without also speaking of Auschwitz.

The question, of course, is whether to regard these contradictions and negations as constitutive *parts* of modernity, or as spaces within which modernity is always and already moving beyond itself into something else ("postmodernity"?). In other words, is postmodernity truly something that comes *after* modernity, or is it something immanent to, and reciprocally engaged with, modernity? Can there be a modernity that isn't in some sense already *postmodern*?

These are just the kinds of questions this issue of *Anarchist Developments in Cultural Studies* is intended to raise and explore – questions that are of enduring significance for anarchists, not only because of anarchism's close but ambivalent association with modernity (and, more recently, with postmodernity), but because of its peculiar relation to history as such. If Marxist historiographers such as Eric Hobsbawm have been quick to classify anarchists as an atavism, as so many "primitive rebels," this is not just a rhetorical maneuver, nor merely the reflex of a politics eager to represent itself as the representation of history's own logic, the very distillation of the modern.¹⁴ Behind this, we can also see a disquiet, the uneasy recognition of a politics that, denied any "permanent space of its

own,”¹⁵ maintains a peculiar relationship with time as well, standing in those “breaks in the flow of time,” “intervals” or “parentheses,” the “gaps and rifts,” the “discontinuities of history.”¹⁶

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- 1 David Graeber. (2004) *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, p. 46.
 - 2 Anthony Giddens and Christopher Pearson. (1999) *Conversations with Anthony Giddens: Making Sense of Modernity*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. p. 94.
 - 3 Lawrence Cahoon. (1996) *From Modernism to Postmodernism*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell. p. 11.
 - 4 Ibid., 12.
 - 5 Op.Cit., fn. 1, p. 94.
 - 6 While Cohen explicitly references Castoriadis’ work, Colombo does not do so here. However, a reading of his work – e.g., *L’Espace politique de l’anarchie: esquisses pour une philosophie politique de l’anarchisme* (Lyon: Atelier de Création Libertaire, 2008) – quickly reveals the importance of Castoriadian concepts of ‘autonomy’ and ‘heteronomy,’ ‘symbolic-instituting capacity’ and the ‘instituted social imaginary,’ in Colombo’s thought (pp. 13, 18, 54, 28, trans. Cohn).
 - 7 Todd May. (1994) *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press. p. 39.
 - 8 Cornelius Castoriadis. (1987) *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (Kathleen Blamey, Trans.) Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. pp.16, 80.
 - 9 Sadie Plant. (1992) *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age*. London: Routledge. p. 15.
 - 10 Daniel Colson. (2001) *Petit lexique philosophique de l’anarchisme de Proudhon à Deleuze* (Jesse Cohn, Trans.). Paris: Librairie Générale Française. p. 234.
 - 11 Chamsy Ojeili. (2001) “The ‘Advance Without Authority’: Post-modernism, Libertarian Socialism, and Intellectuals,” *Democracy & Nature*. Vol. 7, No. 3. p. 396. Warren Breckman, while positioning Castoriadis as a critic of both Lacan and Lévi-Strauss, “the master structuralists who asserted claims over [...] the social world and the psyche,” nonetheless, “[h]e too rejected the idea that we have unmediated access to reality; he too rejected the idea of a sovereign conscious subject for whom language is a transparent medium of expression [...] [and] believed that society is a symbolic construction made up of significations.” (2013) *Adventures of the Symbolic: Post-marxism and Radical Democracy*. New York: Columbia University Press. pp. 97-8.
 - 12 Eduardo Colombo. (2008) *L’Espace politique de l’anarchie: esquisses pour une philosophie politique de l’anarchisme*. Lyon: Atelier de Création Libertaire.

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- 13 Lewis Call. (2002) *Postmodern Anarchism*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books. p. 65. Cannily, Call also remarks that just as “Jean-François Lyotard has argued persuasively that the postmodern should be viewed as a *part* of the modern,” so “postmodern anarchism is, in a sense, the *continuation* of Bakunin’s project” (p. 69, italics mine).
- 14 Eric J. Hobsbawm (1965) *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries*. New York: W.W. Norton. Davide Turcato suggests that the “discontinuity” of histories of anarchism in works such as Hobsbawm’s – “The movement collapsed in the later 1870s... revived again in the later 1880s, to collapse again... In 1892 there was another outburst... In the early 1900s another revival occurred...” – may be an artifact of the historian’s methodology, trapped by its own narrow schema of “rationality.” (2012) *Making Sense of Anarchism: Errico Malatesta’s Experiments with Revolution, 1889-1900*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan. pp. 10-12; Hobsbawm qtd. in Turcato, pp. 11-12.
- 15 Sandra Jeppesen. (2004) “do / make / think: anarchy and culture.” *Culture and the State: Alternative Interventions* (Ed. James Gifford and Gabrielle Zezulka-Mailloux) Edmonton: CRC Humanities Studio. p. 65.
- 16 Daniel Colson. (2004) *Trois essais en philosophie anarchiste: Islam, monadologie, histoire* (Jesse Cohn, Trans.) Paris: Léo Scheer. pp. 195, 199, 34.