

Postanarchism in a Nutshell

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In the past couple of years there has been a growing interest in what some have begun calling “postanarchism” for short; because it is used to describe a very diverse body of thought and because of its perhaps unwarranted temporal implications, even for those within this milieu, it is a term that is more often than not used with a great deal of reticence. But as a term, it is also one which refers to a wave of attempts to try to reinvent anarchism in light of major developments within contemporary radical theory and within the world at large, much of which ultimately began with the Events of May 1968 in Paris, France and the intellectual milieu out of which the insurrection emerged. Indeed, in the preface to Andrew Feenberg’s recent book on the events, *When Poetry Ruled the Streets*, Douglas Kellner points out that poststructuralist theory as it developed in France was not really a rejection of that movement as is sometimes thought, but for the most part was really a continuation of the new forms of thought, critique and action that had erupted in the streets at the time. As he puts it, “the passionate intensity and spirit of critique in many versions of French postmodern theory is a continuation of the spirit of 1968 Baudrillard, Lyotard, Virilio, Derrida, Castoriadis, Foucault, Deleuze, Guattari, and other French theorists associated with postmodern theory were all participants in May 1968. They shared its revolutionary elan and radical aspirations and they attempted to develop new modes of radical thought that carried on in a different historical conjecture the radicalism of the 1960s” (2001, p. xviii).

Thus, whether it is fully self-conscious of this fact or not, it is ultimately against this background that “postanarchism” has recently emerged as an attempt to create a hybrid theory and practice out of the most compelling elements of early anarchist thought as well as more recent critical theories that have emerged out of this and similar milieus around the world, thus reinvigorating the possibility of a politics whose primary slogan is “all power to the imagination” in our own time. It should come as no surprise that this would eventually take place since it is well-known that anarchism was a major element of the events; this is evidenced not only in Raoul Vaneigem’s statement that “from now on, no revolution will be worthy of the name if it does not involve, at the very least, the radical elimination of all hierarchy” (2001, p. 78) but also in a remarkably resonant statement by Michel Foucault a decade later, in which he stated that “where Soviet socialist power was in question, its opponents called it totalitarianism: power in Western capitalism was denounced by Marxists as class domination; but the mechanics of power in themselves were never analyzed. This task could only begin after 1968, that is to say on the basis of daily struggles at the grass roots level, among those whose fight was located in the fine meshes of the web of power” (Gordon, 1980, p. 116).

These are just two of the most obvious examples of this legacy, but countless others like this could easily be dug up to make the case further — even if it might be countered that many of the participants were also largely influenced by existentialism, phenomenology, the Frankfurt School and Western Marxism in general, it is undeniable that a strong anarchistic, anti-hierarchical ethic permeated the entire affair just as it has the theorists who emerged out of it. Thus it can clearly be seen how anarchism has, though perhaps indirectly, nevertheless been a major influence on many of these thinkers, all of whom produced the main body of their works in the aftermath of the events. Paul Virilio for instance, has often directly expressed his affinity with anarchism, citing his participation as one major reason for this. Despite widespread delusions asserting the contrary, poststructuralists did not simply “give up” on insurrectionary and other social movements after May ’68 either.

Virilio's involvement, along with that of Foucault, Deleuze, and Guattari in the Autonomia and free radio movements in Italy and France in the late 1970s, Foucault's engagement with queer liberation and prison abolition movements in the 1980s, Luce Irigaray and Judith Butler's connection with third-wave feminism in the 1990s and Derrida and Agamben's work with the Sans Papiers/No Border movement as well as Hardt and Negri's extensive ties with the antiglobalization movement of the past several years should alone be more than enough evidence to destroy that myth. Further absurd critiques that are sometimes heard, which seek to take a rather unique example such as cyberfeminist Donna Haraway to argue that poststructuralists are universally uncritical of technology or a neo-nihilist like Jean Baudrillard to prove that they unwaveringly reject the possibility of resistance are also quite ignorant since the flip side of such untrue and totalizing statements is that a politics of "resistance" was a central element throughout the entire corpus of Foucault's work, just as the relentless critique of "the art of technology" in all its forms ranging from military ordnance to television has been crucial throughout Virilio's work.

Indeed, far from the images some would give of it, poststructuralism emerged out of a much larger anti-authoritarian milieu which began by taking what up to that point had existed as radical, but still abstract theories and put them into practice in the streets of Paris; for all its limitations over the years, because its origins are to be found here, it nevertheless contains many strong anarchistic elements that are not found elsewhere; therefore, it would seem obvious that amongst these thinkers there would likely be a great deal of radical theory that would be of use to anarchists today who wish to keep their theory relevant to the contours of a structure of domination that does not exist outside of space and time but which is constantly in a state of flux and transformation.

As mentioned, the term "postanarchism" has emerged recently as a term that could be used to describe the phenomenon whereby this radically anti-authoritarian poststructuralist theory has developed and mutated and split off into dozens of hybrid critical theories over the past three decades, finally coming back to inform and extend the theory and practice of one of its primary roots.

Anarchism seems to perpetually forget the lessons of recent events that have shaped the lived present we inhabit daily, all to the unhappy ends of a fetishization of on the one hand the "proud tradition" of the past and on the other the "glorious promise" of the future. As we have seen in the example of the anarchistic events of May '68, it is not simply poststructuralism that is informing anarchism today, but in fact the reverse is and has certainly been the case as well, despite this having been largely ignored by almost everyone — until recently. In order to understand what the emerging phenomena of postanarchism "is" in the contemporary moment, first of all one should consider what it is not; it is not an "ism" like any other — it is not another set of ideologies, doctrines and beliefs that can be laid out positively as a bounded totality to which one might conform and then agitate amongst the "masses" to get others to rally around and conform to as well, like some odd ideological flag. Instead, this profoundly negationary term refers to a broad and heterogeneous array of anarchist theories and practices that have been rendered "homeless" by the rhetoric and practice of most of the more closed and ideological anarchisms such as anarchist-syndicalism, anarchist-communism, and anarchist-platformism as well as their contemporary descendants, all of which tend to reproduce some form of class-reductionism, state-reductionism or liberal democracy in a slightly more "anarchistic" form, thus ignoring the many lessons brought to us in the wake of the recent past.

Postanarchism is today found not only in abstract radical theory but also in the living practice of such groups as the No Border movements, People's Global Action, the Zapatistas, the Autonomos and other such groups that while clearly "antiauthoritarian" in orientation, do not explicitly identify with anarchism as an ideological tradition so much as they identify with its general spirit in their own unique and varying contexts, which are typically informed by a wide array of both contemporary and classical radical thinkers.

Interestingly enough, all of this is to a surprising degree quite in line with the very origin of the term in Hakim Bey's 1987 essay "Post-Anarchism Anarchy". In this essay, he argues that the thing that is keeping anarchism from becoming relevant to the truly excluded of society, which is also the thing driving so many truly anti-authoritarian people away from anarchism, is that it has become so caught up in its own tightly bordered ideologies and sects that it has ultimately mistaken the various doctrines and "traditions" of anarchism for the lived experience of anarchy itself. Between the dichotomous prison of a tragic past and impossible future, he says that anarchism has become an ideological doctrine to be adhered to rather than as a living theory with which to gum up the decentered works of the postindustrial society of control, all of this resulting in the universal foregoing of any real politics of the present, a point also made by Raoul Vaneigem in May '68, but in regards to society in general. Bey goes on to emphasize the various ideological anarchisms' lack of attention to real desires and needs as being as reprehensible as their reticence in the face of more recent radical theory, those challenging thoughts and ideas that might appear to be "risky" or uncomfortable at first glance, especially to an anarchism increasingly comfortable in its form, not unlike the post-industrial temp worker, who at the end of the day plops down into the Lay-Z-Boy and stays there out of sheer exhaustion; if we were to resist this temptation and open anarchism up to an engagement of this sort, he argues, "we could pick up the struggle where it was dropped by Situationism in '68 & Autonomia in the seventies & carry it to the next stage" (1991, p. 62) far beyond where the grassroots radicals, anarchists, existentialists, heterodox Marxists and poststructuralists have ever taken it in the past.

But for Bey, a postanarchist politics would really only become possible if anarchists could somehow find the will to abandon a whole host of leftover fetishisms which have kept anarchism in its own private little network of self-imposed ideological ghettos, including all types of ideological purity, conceptions of power as simply blatant and overt, fetishisms of labor and work, biases against cultural forms of resistance, secular cults of scientism, anti-erotic dogmas which keep sexualities of all forms in the closet, glorifications of formal organization to the detriment of spontaneous action and territorialist traditions that link space and politics, thus ignoring the possibility of nomadic praxis. Fourteen years later, after some important foundational work by radical theorists such as Andrew Koch, and Todd May, this schematic formulation of 'postanarchism' reappeared under the same sign but in a rather different and more fleshed-out concept developed by the Australian political theorist Saul Newman in his book "From Bakunin to Lacan: Antiauthoritarianism and the Dislocation of Power".

Here the term refers to a theoretical move beyond classical anarchism, into a hybrid theory consisting of an synthesis with particular concepts and ideas from poststructuralist theory such as post-humanism and anti-essentialism; Newman explains that "by using the poststructuralist critique one can theorize the possibility of political resistance without essentialist guarantees: a politics of postanarchism...by incorporating the moral principles of anarchism with the poststructuralist critique of essentialism, it may be possible to arrive at an ethically workable, politically valid, and genuinely democratic notion of resistance to domination...Foucault's rejection of the

‘essential’ difference between madness and reason; Deleuze and Guattari’s attack on Oedipal representation and State-centered thought; Derrida’s questioning of philosophy’s assumption about the importance of speech over writing, are all examples of this fundamental critique of authority” (2001, p. 158).

As is implied in Hakim Bey’s conception of postanarchism, here too it is obvious how the anti-authoritarianism which Newman sees running throughout poststructuralist theory would have emerged originally in the world-historic social movements at the end of the 1960s; in the process, the radically anti-authoritarian spirit of anarchism, as one of the primary elements of these milieu, mutated into a thousand different miniviruses, infecting all of these critical theories in many different ways that are only now really being rediscovered. Yet, although he is critical of the essentialism which he sees as endemic within the thought of canonic anarchists like Kropotkin and Bakunin, Newman’s conception of postanarchism does not reject all early anarchist thought; his embrace of Stirner’s egoism as the most important precursor to a politics of this sort illustrates this quite clearly. Finally, it should be noted that it is precisely in this sense that Newman’s conception is actually quite similar to the “postmarxism” of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, in that while it is postanarchist it is also postanarchist (2001, p. 4) in that it is by no means a total rejection of early anarchisms but rather a step beyond the limits defined for them by the Enlightenment thought which had not yet really been subjected to a great deal of critique, while simultaneously embracing the best elements produced by that same revolution in human consciousness including such obvious aspects as the ability of people to govern themselves directly without a sovereign lording over them; the viral strains of a mutant poststructuralism suddenly reappearing in a new form after a long and nomadic exile.

Since the publication of Newman’s book in 2001, there have been several attempts to articulate a conception of postanarchism that would bring on board many of his specific ideas regarding the anarchistic elements of radical poststructuralist thought yet which would also bring it back out of the halls of academia and into broader, more diverse, and more flammable environments, much as Bey had originally described his conception of the term in 1987. Earlier this year, I started a listserv and website by the name of postanarchism which was intended to do just that; I advertised its existence on Indymedia websites all over the world, on Infoshop’s bulletin board and on multiple radical activist and anarchist listservs all of which drew hundreds of anarchists, activists and intellectuals, most commonly attracting those who somehow find a way to be all three simultaneously. Since that time there has emerged an increasingly dynamic discussion which has ranged from the activist topic of social movements like the No Borders movement which has taken on board the ideas of critical theorists like Giorgio Agamben, Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri and Jacques Derrida, to the more strictly intellectual question of the extent to which early anarchist thinkers such as Bakunin and Kropotkin were essentialist in their conceptions of the human subject to the more explicitly anarchist discussion of what tendencies in contemporary anarchism, such as insurrectionary anarchism, social ecology or anarchist-feminism might be the most relevant in the contemporary world order.

There is now even talk of a postanarchism anthology which would collect the dozens of essays that have been circulating around the internet and bring them all together in one place; so far the anthology will likely include such interesting proposals as one by former Black Panther member Ashanti Alston on the outlines of what he conceives as a poststructuralist African anarchism, combining the thought of Wole Soyinka, Sam Mbah, Todd May and Saul Newman as well as another by Jesse Cohn and Shawn Wilbur which would critique Newman’s conception of

postanarchism, arguing that even Bakunin and Kropotkin were far less essentialist and more far critical of scientism than he generally allows. As can easily be discerned by examining this trajectory, the result of this listserv, website and ensuing anthology is that not only has the discussion and the definition of postanarchism now become a hybrid of Bey's and Newman's conceptions of the term, but it has also become that of dozens of others who have been writing about the intersections between anarchism, poststructuralism and other critical theories since at least the early 1990s, with a pace and dynamism that has been steadily increasing on into its crescendo in the present moment. In this often unknowingly simultaneous endeavor, anarchists from all kinds of backgrounds with all kinds of ideas have sought to make contemporary anarchisms relevant to them in their own unique situations, often going beyond poststructuralism itself, borrowing liberally from the best of contemporary radical theory including phenomenology, critical theory, Situationism, postcolonialism, autonomism, postmodernism, existentialism, postfeminism, and Zapatismo amongst others. Andrew Koch for instance argues that postfeminists such as Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva all have a great deal to teach contemporary anarchists about the authoritarian elements of patriarchal foundationalism; Ricardo Dominguez uncovers poetic revelations in the links between Zapatista strategies of decentered netwar and eleuzo-Guattarian rhizomatic forms of resistance to the State form, neither of which he reminds us, need be "plugged in" to be effective.

Thus, it should be clear from all of this that the other than opposition to all forms of domination, the only thing all of these theorists share is an extreme lack of consensus over what it means to combine anarchism with these extremely divergent philosophies; in fact, while some have used it as an excuse to whole-heartedly write off earlier tendencies such as anarchist-syndicalism, ironically some of the main theorists touted as exemplary by such postanarchists, including Paul Virilio, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have all flirted with versions of that exact tradition in various parts of their works, even using terms like "general strike", (Virilio, 1997, p. 41) "anarcho-syndicalist" (Armitage, 2001, p. 19) and "One Big Union" all in the positive (Hardt and Negri, 2000, p. 206).

What this means then, is that radical theory, just like the world in which it has emerged, is always in a perpetual state of flux, a nomadism that never settles down, never completely hardens into one particular shape and in which the "past" eternally returns in new and unexpected ways in the present; many poststructuralist intellectuals, for instance, after having been denounced as increasingly apolitical and obscurantist have paid heed to these calls by using much clearer language and actively trying to engage their theories with the practice of actually existing social movements.

This recent tendency, exemplified most clearly in certain works of Paul Virilio, Giorgio Agamben, Jacques Derrida, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, can thus be seen as a return to the roots of poststructuralism in the Events of May '68 when intellectuals revolted against their roles as the organizers of the cybernetic society and together with millions of workers, immigrants, women and others, turned this world upside down, if only for a few brief, blissful moments. It is in this way that the appearance of postanarchism in recent years can also be seen as an aspect of this return of the recently forgotten past, at least partially as a result of the return of a world-historical social movement that has been challenging all forms of technocratic domination, carrying the struggle of May '68 and the Italian Autonomia to the next stage as Bey had hoped; a phenomena perhaps best summed up, at least for the moment, by the proclamation, "neither the normalization of classical anarchism nor the depoliticization of poststructuralism!"

To visit the postanarchism clearinghouse website or to join the postanarchism listserv, which now has several hundred members from all over the world engaging in discussions like this, please visit the “postanarchism” link at www.spooncollective.org

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