
Review

Anarchafeminism

Chiara Bottici,
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This book takes anarchist feminism in a fresh direction by relocating it within an ontological framework developed from Baruch Spinoza's seventeenth-century efforts, as Bottici says, 'to think the plural' (p. xii). Her goal is to create 'an articulation of women's liberation that does not create further hierarchies' (p. 3). She echoes the direction of much feminist theory in moving 'beyond the logic of binaries' and avoiding universal presumptions by creating 'specific intersections of oppressions' (p. 11). She describes her position as 'critical-colonial', asking, 'How is the settler-colonial structure of the United States impacting the way in which knowledge is produced? How does that structure shape what gets to count as "critique" and what does not? Why are Indigenous philosophies so systematically excluded from a critical theory?' (p. 13).

Bottici builds on Black theory, Indigenous theory, queer theory, feminism, and anarchism to work toward a 'politics of solidarity'; she is 'looking for a new definition of power and a new terrain that will enable us to "relate within equality"' (pp 37, 38). Bottici makes an excellent argument about the often unintended consequences of feminism when it is not fully intersectional: when feminists 'simply focus on their own specific struggles without taking into account those of others, it may well be the case that their emancipation will happen at the expense of further oppression for less fortunate women, beginning with those who most often replace them in the reproductive labor within the household' (p. 83). She rightly notes that anarchism and feminism have historically been Eurocentric, and she asks how our histories have come to be told, and where the terms of inquiry have come from. She pushes us toward a universe of unanswered, sometimes unposed questions, and asks us to be open to views that defy 'common sense'. I welcome this direction for anarchist feminist thinking, while at the same time I have questions about how it can best be pursued.

'Anarchism', Bottici indicates, 'is a *method*, one that questions all forms of hierarchy and therefore invites us to investigate the way in which they mutually reinforce each other' (p. 7, italics in original). In Spinoza's minoritarian thinking,



she finds resources to ‘unpack methodological individualism’ in favor of a thoroughly processual view of people and the world as always already relational (p. 14). She builds on Spinoza’s ‘philosophy of the unique substance’ and ‘ontology of the transindividual’ to explore these relations on three levels: a supra or global level; an inter level of productive and reproductive bodies; and an infra level of relationality within bodies (p. 19). She is always thinking against dualisms: everything is the same basic matter, following Spinoza, and everything is emergent, so manyness is an active expression of oneness, and vice versa.

Bottici makes use of a variety of writers, including Maria Lugones, Judith Butler, Moira Gatens, Karen Barad, Adriana Cavarero, Peter Kropotkin, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, and many others. But most of all she turns to Spinoza: building on Étienne Balibar’s and Gilbert Simondon’s characterizations of Spinoza’s ‘transindividuality’, she finds ontological grounds for a non-hierarchical worldview. As she succinctly says in praise of Spinoza, ‘the most monist of all ontologies can also be the most pluralist’ (p. 109). Spinoza’s God is ‘the unique infinite substance’ which is nature, so, cutting to the chase, god is nature. Reading Bottici’s gloss on Spinoza, the reader has no trouble imagining how this young philosopher got himself excommunicated from his Jewish community in Amsterdam in 1655.

Bottici builds on Spinoza to construct a radically open universe of becoming, in which ‘new and unexpected attributes’ may emerge (p. 112). She brings together ideas and materiality, suggesting that ‘some form of mental activity [be] considered as inherent to every materiality’ (p. 115). Her Spinoza is not an animist, in the sense of claiming that all beings have something like a spirit or soul, but he does offer a view of bodies as always interconnected networks of bodies, energized by his concept of *conatus*—a striving to persist in one’s being, to be emergent within relations. We are always already ‘multividuals’—we contain multitudes. We strive to persist in our being in relations with others. She borrows from Paul Preciado the idea of ‘somatic communism’—a communism of all living beings—not just as a moral goal but an ontological reality. I am intrigued by her argument that all entities can have ‘a very basic kind of mental life’ (p. 118). What does ‘mental’ mean in this context? What does ‘life’ mean? How is this a better interpretation of Spinoza than the argument that things act on us precisely in their thingness, rather than out of a hidden mental activity?

Bottici argues convincingly for ‘bottom-up epistemologies’ that ‘promote “pluraversality”, that is, a kind of thinking that encourages decolonization, creolization or *mestizaje* through intercultural translation, and thereby also questions the dichotomy of “universal” and “particular”’ (p. 16). Her articulation of this anarchist feminist goal raises questions about how best to pursue it.

One of Bottici’s key strategies of argument is to push abstract arguments toward their logical consequences, as though the final deduction in the chain of reasoning must be true. I find this logic troubling, and I wonder if we can draw a different intellectual strategy from the inspiration of Spinoza and other process-philosophers.



For example, she argues, ‘If fighting the oppression of women means that we have to fight all forms of oppression, then statism, nationalism and Eurocentrism are no exceptions’ (p. 14). ‘Feminism’, she declares, ‘means no sovereignty at all’ (p. 71). Yet, for western anarchist-feminists to take the Indigenous theory seriously, for example, we cannot just reject sovereignty and nationhood; we have to be willing to imagine that they could come to mean something very different than the Eurocentric models that govern us now.

‘Anarchism is by definition feminist’, she argues; ‘otherwise it is out of alignment with its own principles’ (p. 85). ‘If we push queer theory to its logical extension, we cannot avoid meeting ecology ... if we push Emma Goldman’s insight that anarchism is the teacher of the unity of life, we cannot help but meet queer ecology...’ (p. 95). Yet for contemporary thinkers to find resources within anarchism’s rich histories, we need to back away from a mandate toward consistency, because it is not an accurate assessment of anarchism as it has done its work in the world. Anarchism cannot be reduced to one consistent set of principles, with which all its expressions must come into alignment: there are too many threads for a single platform to adequately ground its possibilities. Proudhon’s extreme misogyny, for example, was, unfortunately, quite in alignment with his principles: he assumed that gender hierarchy was natural, so women’s subordination in families fits quite well with economic and political egalitarianism elsewhere. Proudhon influenced others, including Benjamin Tucker, the editor of *Liberty*, who also naturalized patriarchy with regard to women’s work. We could just say that because they were sexist (or racist, or able-ist, etc.) they weren’t really anarchists, but by the time we apply that standard to all the major historical thinkers, we would pretty much clear the field. A better avenue for developing Spinoza’s case that the ontological oneness of ‘the same stuff’ is at the same time the home of the manyness of unpredictable becomings, may be to find threads that resonate together within a turbulent field.

Bottici’s way of approaching her material may also account for the lack of examples in the text. She persuasively encourages readers to turn to narrative to understand how specific identities and politics emerge: ‘what is woman, indeed, if not a story?’ (p. 154). But there are not many stories in this book. She tells one powerful, disturbing story based on Laura Anderson Barbata’s visual art representing Julia Pastrana, a famed nineteenth-century ‘bearded lady’ whose hirsute body stood for ‘both abnormal femininity and inferior races’ (p. 173). This story effectively makes the needed point about the practices of intersectional storytelling, but it comes late in the book, after many other opportunities to bring the book’s arguments to life with stories and examples have passed.

Anarchafeminism sets a compelling example: the book ‘create[s] a dialogue between texts, political projects, and philosophical ideas that are not usually associated’ to develop fresh ontologies of becoming (p. 7). Bottici makes a strong case for anarchism as a method and for Spinoza as a useful voice for building



anarchist-feminist process-philosophy. I would like to see more scholars bring process-philosophy into anarchist feminism's orbit: Spinoza, certainly, but also Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Michel Foucault, William James, George Herbert Mead, and Alfred North Whitehead. All these minoritarian thinkers have resources to offer to those who, as Bottici says, are working against ingrained hierarchies and 'think[ing] the plural' (p. xii).

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