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## Review

# Postanarchism

Saul Newman

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Saul Newman has made an original and sustained contribution to contemporary political theory and has helped to re-establish the central place that anarchist ideas occupy within it. *Postanarchism* is the latest statement of his position, and it is as accessible, passionate and invigorating as his other work. Many of the key arguments are advanced in Newman's (2011) *The Politics of Postanarchism*. But *Postanarchism* is more concise, and while it uses some well-rehearsed arguments about nineteenth century anarchist traditions to explain postanarchism's distinctive philosophical twists, it also extends postanarchism's theoretical reach. Postanarchism describes a 'form of thinking and acting without *arché*' – alternatively, 'a way of acting and thinking *anarchistically* in the here and now' (pp. xi–xii, 12). Derived from the ontological anarchism of Reiner Schürmann and Michel Foucault, postanarchism espouses politics and ethics that can also be found in the writings of La Boétie, Stirner and Sorel.

The argument unfolds in six chapters. After setting out the differences between anarchism and postanarchism, (Chapter 1) Newman draws on Max Stirner to flesh out an idea of the 'opaque subject' (Chapter 2) and insurrectionary politics (Chapter 3). This forms the platform for a discussion, in Chapter 4, of symbolic violence. The remaining chapters probe questions of autonomy and freedom, not through the lens of emancipation (requiring revolution and assuming actual physical violence), but looking instead at resistance to voluntary servitude.

Newman's historical and theoretical positioning of postanarchism is reminiscent of Kropotkin's account of anarchism as a politics that was detectable in strands of ancient classical thought and reinforced by the most advanced scientific, literary and artistic ideas of the age. Whereas Newman once pointed to Landauer and Stirner as exceptional precursors of postanarchism, he now treats postanarchism as a current of political thought that has a much longer history. Like Kropotkin, Newman also links radical political theory to social movement activism, highlighting the postanarchist sensibilities of the anti-political 'riots' in Ferguson, Missouri, to 'movements of Occupation around the world' and 'multiple examples of cyber resistance' (p. 47). The key markers of these movements are the rejection of political representation, party politics and electioneering (p. 32). Yet aside from these surface resemblances,



there's very little to tie postanarchism to Kropotkin-brand anarchism, and Newman is certainly keener to show what divides them than admit what unites them.

Newman no longer refers to the historical package as 'classical anarchism'. Proudhon, Bakunin and Kropotkin – who are only referred to in passing – are instead labelled 'revolutionary' anarchists or 'old masters'. Nevertheless the deployment of the anarchist symbol in the 'post' of postanarchism on the book's cover foregrounds his challenge to the past they represent. Moreover, the binary oppositions that Newman invokes to explain postanarchism's novelty – revolution/insurrection, revolutionary violence/non-violent violence, liberation/resistance and utopian planning/utopian imaginary – attests to the importance he continues to attach to anarchism as a theoretical foil. Towards the end of the book, Newman summarises the nature of the relationship:

To the extent that postanarchism is still a form of anarchism, it is an anarchism understood not as [a] certain set of social arrangements, or even as a particular revolutionary project, but rather as a sensibility, a certain ethos or way of living and seeing the world which is impelled by the realization of the freedom that one already has. (p. 114)

The major theoretical difference, from Newman's perspective, is that anarchism was defined by a conception of anarchy as a programme of action, an idea of social revolution and a conception of the stateless society, whereas postanarchism is associated with autonomous modes of thinking and acting – Foucault's 'decisive will to not be governed' – and the renunciation of revolution (p. 108). Newman draws on Alfredo Bonnano's appraisal of 1970s movement politics to establish anarchism's principled commitment to revolution and uses Georges Sorel (shorn of Proudhonian inflexion) and Walter Benjamin to develop postanarchism's alternative insurrectional ethics.

The bulk of the text explores postanarchism's anti-programmatic politics, which Newman describes as ideological emptiness. 'Postanarchism is anarchism that starts, rather than necessarily ends, with anarchy'. The upshot is that 'postanarchism does not have a specific ideological shape and that it may take different forms and follow different courses of action' (p. 15). While Newman is critical of the hegemonic project and representative democratic politics that Chantal Mouffe advocates, postanarchism's politics is necessarily agonistic. Its focus is the 'fundamental form of agonism' that Mouffe neglects, namely, the agonism between 'autonomous movements and practices, on the one hand, and the principle of the state sovereignty itself, on the other' (p. 135). This polarity suggests an antagonism at the heart of agonism. Newman's contention that a class dimension is 'still present in many struggles' (p. 30) and his tendency to represent global 'Occupy' groups as left critics of democracy further hint at this (pp. 132–133). His re-imagining of Sorel's general strike as 'an exodus from our normal patterns of work, consumption and obedience' similarly suggests a homogeneity in agonism (p. 79). Autonomous practice commits



these movements to a policy of complete disengagement from the state and capitalism. It means no bargaining and no demands; a blanket refusal 'to communicate demands and proposals to Power' (p. 32). However, while Newman is silent about the degree to which the anti-state movement pole includes groups at odds with the 'marginal networks' of resistance that he aligns with postanarchism, there are boundaries to postanarchist agonism. He sets these by focusing on two key principles: indifference to power and the will to freedom.

Newman follows Foucault and Agamben to flesh out postanarchism's indifference to power. This has a number of strands. Following Foucault, Newman challenges the idea (attributed to anarchism) that power can be understood as all bad, and that it can be abolished (p. 14); power has no distinct centre; it is coextensive with every social form; and it is always only grounded on its own historical contingency. It also entails the rejection of Jacobin and Marxist dreams of state conquest and/or (anarchist old master) projects driven by the desire to recover pre-formed notions of community. Indifference to power is realised through 'whatever singularities', the Stirnerite concept that embodies the potential for autonomous existence.

Like the indifference to power, the will to freedom also owes something to Foucault, but more to Stirner and La Boétie. Stirner supports the development of the idea of freedom as autonomy or the 'ability to think, live and act otherwise' (p. 107), and La Boétie reveals the secret of freedom's realisation. On Newman's reading, Stirner unites a Nietzschean principle of becoming and self-enactment (mediated by an engagement with Richard Flathman) with an explicitly anti-Nietzschean rejection of aristocracy. The result is a concept of autonomy defined as creative egoism compatible with agonistic egalitarian democracy. Turning to La Boétie, Newman roots autonomy in a thesis of natural freedom and explains its loss or constraint as a result of our own submission or voluntary servitude. La Boétie demonstrated 'how power constructs for itself a hierarchy of relations in which the tyrant's place is sustained by intricate networks and relations of dependency' (p. 102). La Boétie's demonstration, that 'all power depends on our power', should be read both as a reminder of our docility and an encouragement 'to emancipate ourselves from our own servitude' (p. 104). In relaying this message Newman is reminded of Stirner's notion of insurrection and argues: 'Releasing ourselves from this condition is a matter of the will, volition, of "willing to be free"' (p. 104).

At the end of the book Newman argues that the radical force of postanarchist theory lies in the contention that freedom is 'the ontological basis of all power' (p. 107) and in the insight that we are free to think and act differently, as if power no longer existed. The will to freedom softens the grip that power has on our imagination. We become fearless in our insurrection, capable of facing down armed police and occupying public space. Newman's presentation of this argument is persuasive and appealing. But this conclusion begs a question about his analysis of power and the extent to which the postanarchist attribution of a zero-sum concept of state power in anarchism creates a tension in his own work. Newman's postanarchist



critique of contemporary politics appears to cast the state as a monopoliser of power, yet his idea of indifference to power downplays the significance of this concentration. The presence of the state haunts the book, not only as a spook but also as a sociological reality. It is felt in ‘ubiquitous apparatuses and measures of security’, the ‘most terroristic – draconian anti-terroristic and border control measures and exceptional police powers’ (p. 24), and the seductions of direct democracy that Newman describes as ‘a totalizing regime of power – a form of state – which subordinate the self-will of the individual to an alien will’ (p. 133). But the state is not theorised, and Newman’s elision of La Boétie’s analysis of the illusory power of the tyrant with Foucault’s rejection of ‘Power with a capital P’ (p. 105) leaves him little space to do so. Newman appears to acknowledge this tension. He twice notes that the indifference to power allows us to see that power has no substance without ridding us of power’s effects (pp. 105, 137). Applied as a descriptor of contemporary activism, insurrection looks empowering. Elaborated in postanarchist theory, it appears to leave us in an impasse, neither able to contemplate how revolutionary social transformation may be imagined nor encouraged to adopt methods of resistance that compel the state to engage with radical politics.

## Reference

Newman, S. (2011) *The Politics of Postanarchism*. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press.

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