



From Bakunin to Lacan: Anti-Authoritarianism and the Dislocation of Power

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This is an intriguing and ambitious addition to the now growing literature attempting to recuperate, or at least reappraise, the legacy of anarchism for the development of an anti-authoritarian, post-Marxian, yet still radical politics. Like Todd May, whose *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism* this work inevitably resembles, Newman's aim is to test the credentials of anarchism as standard bearer for the mantle of 'most credible alternative to otherwise exhausted totalizing doctrines'. This is to be achieved through subjecting it to the poststructuralist test of validity, that is whether anarchism can avoid the 'essentialist', 'humanist', 'post-enlightenment authoritarianism' that poststructuralists hold to be at the core of 'modernist' forms of theorizing. Part of what makes this work interesting is that the critical gaze is at the same time reversed so that the claim of poststructuralists to be offering the ingredients for a genuinely libertarian and liberating form of critique matching anarchist aspirations, if not their theoretical approach, is also the focus for the volume. Thus the first half of the text concerns the classical anarchist legacy, the dispute with Marxism and the importance of Stirner as a critic of authority. The second half examines the work of some of the more significant poststructuralist thinkers, including Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, and Derrida, subjecting them in turn to the anarchist 'test' for relevance in elaborating strategies of resistance to the status quo.

What becomes clear over the course of the book is the nature of the synthesis Newman is aiming for, that is one between left libertarian ideals albeit in the hands of anarchists articulated on modernist terms, and a radical 'post-foundational' method which has (qua 'postmodernism' — poststructuralism's bastard child) long been charged with political ineffectuality. This is, it is clear, an immensely difficult trick to pull off. Newman is nonetheless very compelling at least as concerns why it is an operation worth embarking on. As he argues, it is undoubtedly the case that a great deal for what passes as 'critical theory' is offered in the form of poststructuralist critique. It is also the case that whilst classical anarchists can sound very libertarian, all too often their suggestions as to how freedom and equality are to be reconciled have a worryingly authoritarian ring to them. What needs to be established is how such an



approach advances radical critique. What positive recommendations do such a synthesis have to offer?

What is telling in relation to the above is that Newman writes in terms of the development, not of a project or a specific vision of what a liberated form of existence would look like (too totalizing), but of, well, an ‘ethic’. This would be an ethic based upon — if not ‘grounded’ in — the need to preserve and promote ‘singularity’ as a value in itself, implying as he puts it, ‘a respect for individuality and individual difference’ (p. 170). Heard this before? I thought so. It is an almost verbatim demand from J.S. Mill’s *On Liberty*, not it seems a key text in the armoury of poststructuralist critique, but one whose sentiments seem almost exactly to map on to the concerns articulated here. Of course we could argue all day about how Mill was also a utilitarian (of sorts), an essentialist (of sorts) and all other manner of worrying things besides. Yet the central problematic of Mill’s text is how best to preserve and promote ‘singularity’, and as Newman seems happy to admit, this singular thing is the individual, albeit one (radically) unencumbered by any sort of expectations as to how she should behave, think, act etc. The difficulty then becomes one of showing that the defence of the singular involves some radical departure from where we are now. What, we need to know, is radical about a ‘radicalism’ that insists only that we adopt an ‘ethic’ of care for the other, particularly when the examples of how that care could be articulated in a form of practice is rendered in terms of the formal elaboration of rights in defence of the individual (p. 170)? If it is not an outright contradiction to think in terms of a postfoundational or non-essentialist liberalism, then arguably it would look something like the case put forward here. If, however, we accept Newman’s argument that liberalism is itself implicated in the totalizing operation that characterizes modernist forms of discourse, then perhaps we should see in such a stance the starting point for the elaboration of a radical politics that is radical in practice, not just in ‘theory’. This would, I suggest, take the concept of ‘singularity’ as signifying forms of ensemble other than the individual, which is the singularity focused upon here. A radical reading of singularity would insist (with Deleuze and Guattari) that ‘singularity’ be read to include any ensemble of entities able to articulate needs, wants, desires, fantasies, aspirations. This is to say that sovereign ‘body’ could be read in terms of the collective, the communal, the shared and not just the individual. Liberals of course argue that such a stance would pose a ‘threat’ to the individual as the one to whom ‘care’ is owed; but then this is precisely the point of most radical critiques of liberalism. A politics that subordinates the social and collective to the individual is one that is happy to stand by as communities fragment and disappear under the crushing weight of the exercise of individual ‘rights’; or to stand mute as indigenous populations are subjected to the individual’s ‘right’ to buy up and plunder the natural resources upon which they depend for their



well-being. Protecting the ‘singular’ as ‘individual’ has, it could reasonably be argued, as long and disastrous a history as has care for any other kind of entity. Thus the point is less about enshrining, even less ennobling, one or the other, but about recognizing the multiplicity of possible forms of the ‘singular’ — individual, communal, collective — so that one singularity is prevented from extinguishing all others. Newman only has space to hint at the elaboration of this more radical reading of the singular; but he should nonetheless be credited with opening the space for its possible articulation in this otherwise fascinating and well-written book. Radical thought now needs to expand and explore the potential of the arguments advanced here as part of the process of rethinking the terms upon which genuinely critical forms of discourse can be advanced.

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