

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright
May 21, 2012



sasha k

Post-Anarchism or Simply Post-Revolution?

sasha k
Post-Anarchism or Simply Post-Revolution?
2003

wesiak.kilu.de

2003

Saul Newman, *From Bakunin to Lacan: Anti-Authoritarianism and the Dislocation of Power* (Lexington Books, 2001, \$70.00).

In “From Bakunin to Lacan,” Saul Newman claims to want to reinvent anarchism (130); in fact, he claims not only to reinvent anarchism but to surpass it in creating postanarchism. He does so, because he alleges that anarchism has a hidden authoritarianism at its foundation, the authoritarianism of an essentialized human nature. However, this is not a nuanced study of anarchist theory (either of the anarchism of Kropotkin and Bakunin, of other older anarchists, or of contemporary anarchism).¹ Newman’s postanarchism is built upon an untenable and reductionist critique of anarchism.

Thus, after a short critique of Marxist economic reductionism, Newman moves onto his own reduction of anarchism. In the second short (15 page) chapter, Newman argues that anarchism is founded upon an essentialist notion of human nature — that the human is, by nature, good and pure of power. This essential human nature is then used as a basis from which to critique and resist power. “Anarchism relies on essence: on the notion of an essential, natural human subjectivity; on there being a natural essence in social relations that will be able to take the place of the state, the place of power. This idea of essence constitutes anarchism’s point of departure, its place of resistance which is uncontaminated by power.” (51) Newman quite rightly critiques this Manichean view of the world. To essentialize human nature in such a fashion would limit the possible ways humans could live and relate; something, one would think, anarchists would be against. Yet, we should ask, is this view really that of anarchism?

Newman uses Kropotkin and Bakunin as his stand-ins for anarchism in general, and, in turn, only a few quotes from each to make his case. After giving anarchism such a cursory treatment, Newman’s only mention of anarchism for the rest of the book comes in the form of the repetition ad infinitum of the assertion that anarchism

¹ To be clear, Newman’s work is not meant for anarchists, but for an academic audience. This is obvious from that fact that he chose an academic publisher for his work, one that charges a \$70.00 list price for this short work. So perhaps it is unfair to judge Newman’s book from the perspective of anarchists at all, then again Newman’s reductionist reading of anarchism should not go unchallenged.

relies upon an essentialized human nature. Sentences reiterating this one dimensional view of anarchism litter the book; for example, we hear: “For anarchists, morality is the essence of man” (40); “Anarchism can reject the state because it argues from the perspective of an essential place – natural human society – and the morality and rationality immanent within it” (46); “For anarchists, human essence is the point of departure from which state power will be overthrown” (62); anarchism is “based on the liberation of one’s essence” (91); and, anarchism is a “moral philosophy . . . grounded upon the firm foundations of human essence” (127). The assertion goes on and on as if by repetition the argument will become more convincing. Newman constructs this essentialist “anarchism” as a straw man in order to knock it down and to put his postanarchism in its place.

As I argue in this review, Newman critique simplifies both Kropotkin and Bakunin as well as contemporary anarchism: anarchism does not “rely” on an essentialized, singular notion of human nature. Newman takes Kropotkin and Bakunin completely out of their historical context, portraying their arguments on human nature as if they were made in an ahistorical vacuum, and then compared to a post-structuralism that came about a century later. Of course, in comparison to the post-structuralists, whose critique is centered on essentialism, Kropotkin and Bakunin’s critiques of essentialism might seem weak; no great surprise there.

Yet, by viewing Kropotkin’s arguments about mutual aid in context we could note that he was arguing against the common philosophical view of the time, which saw human nature as essentially bad. In other words, if we view Kropotkin within his context we could see his whole discussion of the tendency of mutual aid within humanity as a critique of Social Darwinism’s essentialization of human nature as competitive. Seen in the light of his time (instead of simply as a timeless text), Kropotkin actually breaks human nature open with his critique in a way that humans can be seen to have a wide repertoire of ways of relating instead of a singular, essential human nature. But viewing Kropotkin in this way, of course, would turn Newman’s postanarchist project simply into a project of translating anarchism into post-structuralist and Lacanian language: the “post” would wither away without Newman’s reduced version

anarchists would argue that a revolution would necessarily usher in an “eternal reign of freedom” or that power itself would simply disappear. But Newman’s complex argument seems set up to get us beyond this messy little problem of revolution.⁴ For him, “resistance” then becomes an endless questioning of domination without any attempt to end the reign of the state (which Newman says we should no longer focus on) or capitalism (a discussion of which is almost completely absent from the book) or any attempt to posit the possibility of a new world beyond our present social system. The message seems to be, hone your critical skills but get used to the eternal present of power relations.

Unfortunately, this book’s argumentation is often too quick to be convincing, and, in the end, it relies on many assertions to speed us to its conclusion pronouncing the coming birth of postanarchism. In the process much gets reduced and over-simplified, especially anarchism in its great variety. Of course anarchists can always sharpen their critical edge, but Newman’s reduction of anarchism to a singular foundation actually blocks a self-critical look at anarchism. This book would have been much more interesting if had taken a less one-dimensional view of anarchism, if it had taken it seriously, but such a perspective would have meant giving up most of what makes postanarchism post-anarchism.

⁴ This seems somewhat akin to YaBasta!’s post-revolutionary, post-autonomist argument.

of Kropotkin and Bakunin. Newman’s critique and, subsequently, his production of postanarchism, relies first on the production of a “classical anarchism” that is a mere card-board cut out of historical anarchism.

I would argue rather than being based on a posited singular human nature, anarchist theory mostly views the human as having an open potential, one that is constructed by exercising one’s power over one’s own life. In this sense, mutual aid is not an essence but a capacity, a potential, a tendency, part of the human repertoire of modes of relating. Competition, likewise, isn’t an essence but part of our repertoire. Kropotkin, we could note, didn’t argue that competition would disappear in an anarchist society. In fact, a better way to understand anarchism is as an argument about how we can use our power to recombine the multitude of ways of relating of which the human is capable. Anarchists propose to do this in order to form new and diverse ways of relating beyond those organized through domination. Neither cooperation nor competition are simply judged as good or bad within anarchist theory. There is a lot of cooperation within a corporation but it is hierarchized, compulsory and channeled to ends that have escaped our desires. There is competition within a chess game, but this is not essentially negative. The key for anarchists is how these potentials are organized. Nor is this repertoire a closed, finished, or natural entity. It is very open to transformation; it expands in relation to our material conditions, our power over our own lives, and our creativity. This understanding of anarchism sheds light on the complexity of Bakunin in a way that Newman’s does not.

In fact, Newman weakens his own argument when he brings up the “hidden contradiction” (49) of Bakunin, a contradiction that only exist in the first place if you view Bakunin as an essentialist in the way Newman does. Newman argues that Bakunin “unintentionally” throws into question anarchism’s foundation upon the goodness of human nature when he states that humans also have a desire for power. The contradiction isn’t Bakunin’s, but Newman’s. It isn’t that Bakunin founds his anarchism upon a good human nature, pure from power, and then contradicts himself by saying that people can desire power; rather, Bakunin does not seem to argue that human’s have a

singular human nature at all, but that humans have a multitude of complex desires.

Not coincidentally, Newman makes almost no mention of any contemporary anarchists,² perhaps because if he was to take contemporary anarchism seriously his project would shrink to more humble proportions.³ Although some contemporary anarchists may argue that humans have an essentially good human nature uncontaminated by power, such an argument is in no way necessary to or even wide spread within the anarchist revolutionary project. In fact, contrary to Newman's assertions, most anarchists are not simply against power in the abstract and in all its forms. Anarchists use power in two senses. Anarchists are, for the most part, against Power, which means institutionalized and state power, but they are also for taking back their own power to control their own life. Power, in the second sense, will not simply disappear in an anarchist society, but it would take a very different form from that of the state. Most anarchists would have no problem using their power in combination with that of others in order to end the reign of capital and the state. We are not uncontaminated by power; power is part of the way we exist in the world. Anarchists are, however, against the centralization and institutionalization of power and hierarchical power-relations; anarchists are against domination. But in Newman's unsophisticated view of anarchism all this is lost: anarchists simply believe that human nature is uncontaminated by power, cut and dry.

After dealing with anarchism, Newman goes on to argue that Stirner, whom he places as completely outside of anarchism, surpasses anarchism by critiquing the idea that the human has an essence and by positing the human as an empty space of exploration

² Newman makes very brief mention of Murray Bookchin, John Clark (mostly to make an argument about Stirner), and Carol Erlich. Perhaps as a gauge of Newman's attention to contemporary anarchism we could look at his footnote description of Zerzan: Newman claims Zerzan's anarchism is based on "the power of language to liberate the world"! (175 fn7)

³ This is also probably related to the academic nature of Newman's work, which takes place in academic libraries where the anarchist works one would find are mostly 100 year old "classics."

and creativity. Stressing Stirner's critique of the idea of a fixed human identity is a useful way to read him; yet, it could be noted that, while most anarchists aren't Stirnerites, anarchism is closer to this position than Newman would have us believe. Newman then moves quickly through clear, though by no means original, readings of Foucault and Deleuze and Guattari and onto more original chapters on Derrida and Lacan. Both Derrida and Lacan are used by Newman to critique post-structuralism.

This is perhaps the most interesting and useful section of the book. It should be stressed that Newman isn't arguing that postanarchism is a combination of anarchism and post-structuralism in the way that Todd May's *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism* combines the two. Rather, he sees postanarchism as moving beyond both anarchism and post-structuralism. In this sense, Lacan plays a similar role in relation to post-structuralism as Stirner does in relation to anarchism, and it is out of the two that postanarchism is constructed. Newman also gives us a strong critique of identity politics, arguing, instead, for an understanding of individuals that stresses their singularity.

If, however, postanarchism isn't really post anarchism as I have argued it isn't, what is it post? I would first say that it does make a strong critique of post-structuralism that could be useful to anarchists. But it is also "post" in another sense; it is post-revolution. For Newman, revolution is a Manichean confrontation between a pure human essence and Power (capital for Marxists and the State alone for anarchists). Therefore, "revolutionary philosophies, such as anarchism, . . . foresee the final overcoming of power and the eternal reign of freedom." (90) And once the essentialized purity of human nature is shown to be a fiction, Newman argues, the whole revolutionary project falls apart. Newman calls this positing of a revolutionary subject against the state a relationship based on resentment, a subjectivity produced by a reaction to the state or capital, instead of one's own desires.

Thus Newman states: "Perhaps the whole idea of revolution should be abandoned for a form of resistance to power which is, like power itself, nebulous and dispersed" (79); and "The question of the state . . . is one whose importance has diminished" (166). Yet, few