

...for more interesting times

Benjamin Franks

The Politics of Postanarchism

Saul Newman

Edinburgh University Press, 2010. (pp.200. £65)

In 1994 the global apparatus of the neo-liberal economic order was solidifying, with the enactment of the North American Free Trade Association; and at the same time contestation arose, signalled by the Zapatista uprising. It was also the year that a small but significant book by a US academic, Todd May, was published, called *The Political Philosophy of Post-Structuralist Anarchism*. This book sought to update and renew the anarchist tradition, by highlighting the restrictive strategic and modernist features of traditional revolutionary thought, using some of the theoretical insights derived from poststructuralist thinkers like Jean-François Lyotard, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.

In the nearly two decades that followed, there has been a noticeable rise in interest not only in anarchism, but also in tracing the similarities and tensions between politically-engaged post-structuralism and anarchism. Amongst the most insightful, prolific and, as a consequence, influential postanarchist thinkers has been Saul Newman. His 2001 book *From Bakunin to Lacan* and his subsequent writings have done much to raise the profile of anarchist features of poststructuralism amongst academics, and the possibilities of fruitful engagement in poststructuralist theory for anarchists. In addition, academic publishers have published a variety of scholarly contributions that are avowedly postanarchist or include a major postanarchist current, such as: Lewis Call's *Postmodern Anarchism* (Lexington, 2003), Richard Day's *Gramsci is Dead* (Pluto, 2005), Uri Gordon's *Anarchy Alive!* (Pluto, 2007), many of the authors in Randall Amster, Abraham DeLeon, et al, collection, *Contemporary Anarchist Studies* (Routledge, 2009) and Nathan Jun's edited book *New Perspectives on Anarchism* (Lexington, 2010). Other volumes are expected to join them soon including Duane Rousselle and Sureyya Evren's long-awaited anthology *The Post-Anarchist Reader* (Pluto, 2011). Specialist academic journals too have published articles utilising, analysing or critiquing the methodologies and techniques of postanarchism, including a special issue of *Anarchist Studies* dedicated to postanarchism alone, which was edited by Newman. Contributions have also appeared online in 'zine format. Whilst a little short of a decade ago postanarchism was a 'cottage industry', to use Ronald Creagh's 2006 description, it has now developed into a small but significant section of the knowledge factory.

Readers of Newman's earlier works will be familiar with many of the key themes and arguments in *The Politics of Postanarchism*. It is a useful addition to the literature on four main grounds. First, it is a clear re-statement of Newman's version of postanarchism (with occasional reference to other formulations); second, it does apply postanarchism to contemporary events, such as the banking crisis (p. 28, p. 80), the surveillance state wrought by The War on Terror (pp. 29-30; p. 75) and the struggles around immigrant rights (p. 115, pp. 172-3); third, it situates postanarchism amongst recent theoretical developments such as Badiou's critique of the natural social principle against the artificial political principle (pp.110-11) or Michael Hardt and Toni Negri's autonomist account of the multitude (pp. 121-3). Finally, in keeping with Newman's goals, the book provokes the reader to assess the limits of anarchism (p.5), by searching for and highlighting *aporia* (inconsistencies and

contradictions that are core) to anarchism. In doing so, it handily also raises questions about Newman's own postanarchist presuppositions.

Newman's central contention is that anarchism is wedded to an enlightenment rationalist – and indeed positivist – account of knowledge, and to a fixed, essentialist account of the subject, in which, Newman claims, anarchists produce a Manichean split between, on the one side, the benign natural law or *social principle* (a form of anti-politics) and on the other the malign *political principle*, an unnatural order of power. The latter is associated with the state (p. 4). These classical anarchist assumptions are not only philosophically unsustainable (pp. 58-59), but also produce hierarchical political practice. The knowledgeable elite armed with vanguard knowledge leads the masses in confronting the state and leaves other micropolitical oppressions untouched. In seeking out the authoritarian moments in anarchism, Newman seeks to make an anarchist critique to anarchism (p. 51).

Thus, the first conflict Newman identifies in anarchism is that between its commitment to freedom versus the fixed essential self. If humans are essentially good, or prone or determined to a particular type of benevolent social relationship, this severely restricts human freedom to produce its own destiny. It also leads to an anti-politics, as such essentialisms lead to a view of the good coming from natural social harmony which the state disrupts or distorts.

Newman has made similar criticisms of classical anarchism's essentialism, and this has led to objections to this characterisation. Notable opposition to Newman's account of classical anarchism has come from a variety of sources: Sasha Villon, Jesse Cohn and Shawn Wilbur, author(s) from South Africa's Zabalaza Anarchist Communist Federation, Alan Antliff and Nathan Jun. These are not explicitly addressed in this book. A dominant theme amongst many of these criticisms is that Newman (and other similar postanarchists) has misrepresented classical anarchists, as they were not united by an essentialist view of the human subject. Significant classical anarchists such as Errico Malatesta (*Life and Ideas*, p. 73) viewed the concept of 'natural harmony' as 'the invention of human laziness'. In addition, Peter Kropotkin – who Newman specifically cites as an essentialist (p. 36 and p. 38) – was clear that humans have anti-social instincts as much as social ones, and whilst Newman acknowledges this (p.39) – perhaps in part in unacknowledged reply to earlier critics – he nonetheless asserts a social essentialism on classical anarchism.

Newman's critics are not denying that there are some essentialisms in classical anarchism but they point out that where they do exist they are not universal and rarely core to anarchism in the way that Newman contends. Instead, the appeal to benign humanism are often a rhetorical ploy to either counter the social Darwinism which suggested that individuals were inherently selfish such that market relationships refereed by a strong state is the best mode for humankind, or to highlight that as biological creatures certain basic needs are not being met by capitalism.

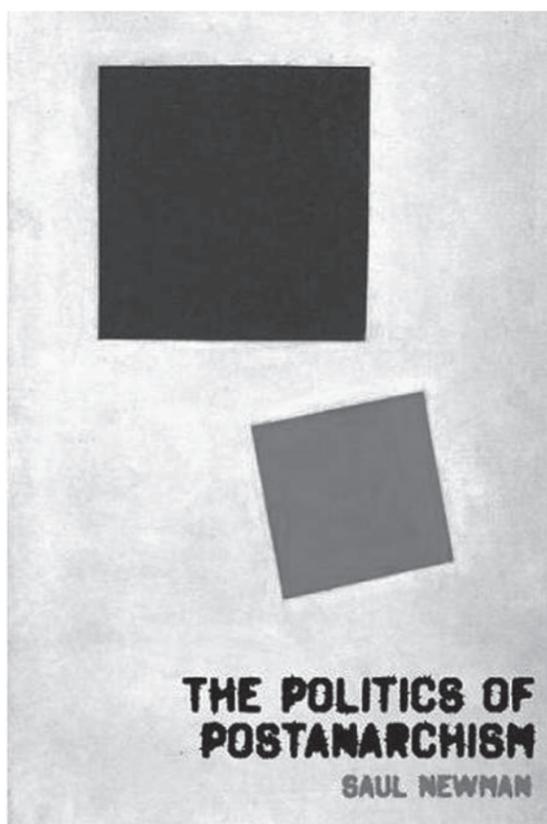
The apparent contradiction in anti-politics is similarly resolvable within the anarchist canon. Anarchism proclaims to be anti-political, says Newman, because it rejects the state, but it has to be involved in politics because it seeks new forms of anti-hierarchical organisation and interrelationship. This is no contradiction, but simply a different use of the word 'politics'. One is the standard definition concerning battles for state power – which anarchists

reject – and the other interpretation deals with wider constructions and distributions of power, which anarchists have always engaged in, from the unions and revolutionary syndicates to insurrectionary committees. There is evidence of anarchists in these organisations reflecting on how to avoid recreating hierarchies. Newman is right to point out that the state is not just a set of coercive institutions but is evident in the structure of our everyday social relationships. This is a view he finds in the (pre-post) anarchism of Gustav Landauer (pp.161-62), and the last great modernists, the Situationists Guy Debord and Raoul Vaneigem (pp.65-6), who borrowed it from the Marxian-thinker Henri Lefebvre. As a result, it is hard to see what postanarchism is bringing here which is not already part of anarchist self-reflection.

By seeking out the *aporia* in anarchism (even where they are not always present) Newman usefully acts as a spur to re-think postanarchism. Are there perhaps some inherent limits or conflicts in his postanarchism? Whilst sympathetic to Newman's account of anarchism/postanarchism sharing an open commitment to 'equal liberty' (pp.20-24) or 'equaliberty' (pp.144-45), namely the view that freedom and equality are mutually defining rather than in conflict, it does present a number of problems for postanarchism. It does, for example, suggest a fundamental or universal core to postanarchism, something which Newman's anti-foundationalism rejects. In addition, the principle of 'equality' is a fundamentally unstable and potentially contradictory concept. After all, appeals to equality suggest a shared value structure by which differing phenomena or agents may be assessed as 'equal', which is something that Newman problematises with his emphasis on singularities and rejection of moral norms (p. 7). As contemporary feminist critics have pointed out, demands for 'equality' suggest that there is some standard by which all other entities are measured by, such that gender equality is simply an appeal for women to measure up to the standard of 'man', and thus privilege the 'male'. Thus, appeals to equality are actually reassertions of a hierarchy of values and identities.

I am sympathetic to the main thrust of Newman's thesis – "to affirm anarchism's place as the very horizon of radical politics" (p.2) – though it is also slightly problematic, for it assumes that everyone shares the same horizon. It might instead be more accurate to see anarchism as 'a possible horizon' rather than the prime or sole discourse and practice of radicalism. The risk of such a clear, but singular, vision is that it potentially closes off routes of political solidarity or risks colonising other thinkers from distinctive radical traditions, claiming them as unconscious anarchists (see for instance p.168, p.176). Although Newman recognises some heterodox movements in Marxism, he places anarchism in opposition to Marxism (pp.11-12, pp.75-76), portraying it as a fundamentally statist and realist political movement. Despite rightly rejecting Leninism, Newman nonetheless adopts an almost entirely Leninist reading of Marx, which risks closing off the possibility of more fruitful engagement between anarchists and Marxists.

A further tension in Newman's work concerns postanarchism's location in relation to anarchism. By endorsing poststructuralist anti-essentialism, and a view of power/knowledge as contingent, constructed and situational, Newman suggests that postanarchism offers a substantive improvement on this form of radical politics, whilst at the same time wishing to suggest that post-anarchism is not such a transcendence. Newman views such claims to progress as being a fundamental part



of a Hegelian, modernist mindset that recreates hierarchy (p. 148 and p.153).

Newman states explicitly at critical junctures of the book that: "Postanarchism is not [...] an abandonment or movement beyond anarchism. On the contrary, postanarchism is a project of radicalising and renewing anarchism – of thinking of anarchism as a politics." (pp. 4-5) and "Postanarchism is not a specific form of politics; it offers no formulas or prescriptions for change. It does not have the sovereign ambition of supplanting anarchism with a newer name", but is rather a "celebration" of anarchism (p.181). This is a position that is consistent with Newman's arguments against Modernist discourses of progress. However, such assertions seem inconsistent with his other claims that anarchism requires a substantive break, which postanarchism offers – "if anarchism is to remain relevant to political struggles today, it must construct new understandings of politics, ethics, subjectivity and utopia which are not grounded in essentialist or rationalist ontologies and which eschew guarantees of the dialectic" (pp.163-64) – and that postanarchism provides grounds to think of anarchism "in new ways" (p. 182).

Newman seems to suggest that postanarchism provides a way of refreshing or revitalising anarchism. This is an attractive project, but not one without a number of problems. The first is that whilst there is much to agree with in Newman's account of postanarchism, it is hard to see, bar in its more academically sophisticated mode of expression, how it differs significantly from the internal critiques already part of anarchist and other radical traditions. Take, for instance, Newman's account of the role of utopianism in anarchist thought, which, like so much of the book, is cogent and insightful. As Newman points out, utopias are not blueprints to determine action, but ways of critiquing present social forms as well as ways to inspire (pp.67-68, pp.138-39). Such an account of utopia one which was already significant in anarchism, drawing as it does from Georges Sorel and Kropotkin. Moreover, the idea that the utopian should be embodied in the practices of the here and now, such as contesting the state in our daily action (p. 163), sounds exactly like the principle of prefiguration – the means embodying the goal – which has been one of the main distinguishing features of anarchism since its earliest classical forms under Michael Bakunin and James Guillaume.

If these characteristics are already present within the classical anarchist canon and within contemporary (non-post prefixed) anarchist tradition, what does Newman's postanarchism add that is new? It is, first, a welcome reassertion that fluid, anti-hierarchical practices are already a core feature of anarchism. Newman's postanarchism also rightly highlights the ethical in radical politics, another longstanding feature of anarchism. Here, though, Newman cites Emmanuel

Levinas and the concept of the encounter. This posits that in dealing with others we unsettle the sovereignty of our ego and also disrupt others with whom we engage; in relation to others, we have therefore a "radical responsibility for the other" (p. 55). The encounter between academic post-structuralism might radically unsettle anarchism, but rather than produce new anti-hierarchical social relations, it might simply act to assert the sovereignty of the academic discourse. Radical discourses have gone this way before. Terry Eagleton laments that when Marxism encountered academe its trajectory was altered: Socialist analysis which was a resource "among dockers and factory workers ha[s] turned into a mildly interesting way of analysing *Wuthering Heights*" (*After Theory*, p.44). In this case the danger is that whilst poststructuralist engagements provide useful aids for encouraging anarchists to reflect on their practice, they might overcode anarchism into a discourse associated only with those located in particular educationally-privileged locations and thereby domesticate and dominate (like the reviled vanguard) radical activity. It is this fear that explains some of the hostility to postanarchism and poststructuralism in anarchist forums less centred on academe (see for instance libcom.org).

There are mitigating factors against this academic colonisation. Newman clarifies – and therefore democratises – some complex debates from within the realms of high theory, making them more accessible to the non-specialist reader. He deserves at least a pint for making sense of the Simon Critchley versus Slavoj Žižek dispute (pp. 113-15); for making the argument between Ralph Miliband and Nico Poulantzas clear and relevant (pp. 76-77), and for explaining and critiquing potentially obscure concepts such as Negri's *constituent* and *constituted* power (pp. 87-89) and Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's post-socialism (pp.89-93).

Also attractive is Newman's optimism, drawing from examples of militancy like the aforementioned Zapatistas, peasant and landless protection of the commons in Brazil, Peru and West Bengal and factory occupations in Europe (pp. 174-75). It is a refreshing change from discourses of defeat, retreat and retrenchment to hear a knowledgeable theorist propose "that an insurgent political space has already emerged, characterised by new experimental forms of political practice and organisation that are anarchistic in orientation" (pp. 167-68). If he is right it will make for more interesting times.

This article is based on the review that appeared in *Anarchist Studies* Vol. 16 No. 2 (Autumn 2010). Benjamin Franks is the author of *Rebel Alliances: The means and ends of contemporary British anarchisms* (AK Press, 2006) and co-editor of *Anarchism and Moral Philosophy* (Palgrave, due out October 2010).