

# What is Postanarchism? Rethinking the political through anarchist theory

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## Introduction

Why be interested in anarchism today? Why be interested in this most heretical of political traditions, whose shadowy existence on the margins of revolutionary politics has lead many to dismiss it as a form of ideological mental illness? The central claim of anarchism - that life can be lived without a state, without centralised authority - has been an anathema not only to more mainstream understandings of politics, which bear the legacy of the sovereign tradition, but also to other radical and revolutionary forms of politics, which see the state as a useful tool for transforming society.

Furthermore, anarchism has often lacked the ideological and political coherence of other political traditions. While there is a certain body of thought that is unified around principles of anti-authoritarianism and egalitarianism, anarchism has always been heterodox and diffuse; while it has had its key exponents, anarchism is not constituted around a particular name, unlike Marxism. Indeed, despite the startling originality of some classical anarchist thinkers anarchists have usually been more concerned with revolutionary practice than theory. Moreover, while anarchism has historically had a

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certain influence on workers' movements, as well as on other radical struggles, it has not been as politically hegemonic as Marxism. Anarchism has flared up in brilliant flashes of insurrection – revolts and autonomous projects throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries - but these have just as quickly died down again, or have been savagely repressed.

And yet, despite these defeats, and despite anarchism's marginality, we can perhaps point to what might be called an 'anarchist invariant' – the recurring desire for life without government that haunts the political imagination. The rejection of political authority in the name of equality and liberty will always be part of the vocabulary of emancipation. One can see an expression of this desire now in contemporary struggles against global capitalism, which are also struggles for autonomy. The vision of anarchy – of life without government - which for the sovereign tradition is the ultimate nightmare, is the eternal aspiration of the radical tradition. My central aim in *The Politics of Postanarchism* (2010) is to affirm anarchism's place *as* the very horizon of radical politics.

This is a bold claim. Anarchism would be considered utopian by many, indeed most, on the political left. Yet, there is an inevitable utopian dimension in radical politics – indeed this is what makes it radical; and I would argue that utopianism – or a certain articulation of it – should be asserted rather than disavowed. Moreover, we should recall that a society of free association without a state was also Marx's dream. Anarchism embodies the most radical expression of the principles of liberty and equality, proclaiming their

inextricability, as well as showing that they cannot be adequately realised within a statist framework: both liberty and equality are constrained in different ways by the state. Nor can democracy be truly conceived within the state, according to anarchism. Democracy – which is the motor for generating new and radical articulations of equality and liberty – always exceeds the limitations of the state and opposes the very principle of state sovereignty. However, for anarchists, democracy has to be more than just majority rule, because this can threaten individual liberty. Rather, it has to be imagined as a democracy of singularities, in which difference and autonomy are just as important as political and social equality.

For these reasons, anarchism is central to the politics of emancipation – indeed, it can be seen as the very compass of radical politics. Also, it is my contention that anarchism has important lessons to teach other forms of politics. Anarchists, for instance, highlight the ultimate inconsistency of liberalism: that individual liberty and rights cannot be properly expressed within a state order, despite the institutional checks and balances that are supposed to restrain state power. The politics of security and the prerogative, which have always been part of liberalism, going back to Locke, ultimately intensify the power of the state and thus pose a threat to individual freedom. Liberalism has always foundered on the impossible project of reconciling freedom and security. Furthermore, anarchists show that liberalism's attempts to justify state authority through notions of consent and the social contract are unconvincing sleights of hand, and that therefore the state remains an illegitimate imposition of power. And yet, there is an anarchist dimension within

liberalism – in the moment of rebellion in Locke’s political philosophy, for instance, or in the radical libertarianism found in JS Mill’s thought. Anarchism might be seen as the wild underside of liberalism, seeking to extend the realm of individual liberty whilst showing that this can only be realised in the absence of the state and amidst social and economic equality.

To socialists, anarchists teach the vital lesson that social equality cannot come at the expense of liberty; that not only does this trade-off violate individual freedom and autonomy, but it also violates in a different way, equality itself. This is because an equality that is imposed coercively on individuals entails some authoritarian mechanism of power, and this in itself a form of inequality, a hierarchical relationship of command and obedience which makes a mockery of the very idea of equality. Equality is meaningless and self-contradictory unless people can freely determine it for themselves, without the intervention of a centralised state apparatus. The nineteenth century Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, in his debates with Marx in the First International, warned that if the state itself was not abolished in a socialist revolution, there would emerge a dictatorship of bureaucrats and scientists who would lord it over the peasants and workers, imposing a new tyranny – a prediction confirmed in the experience of the Bolshevik revolution and its aftermath.

We have seen in recent times the collapse of these two competing ideologies. Political liberalism – to the extent that it ever existed as anything other than a theory – has been

eroded not only by market fundamentalism (neoliberalism), where the market subsumes the political space, but also by the politics of security, in which the totalitarian logic of emergency and control has displaced the language of rights, freedoms and the accountability of power. Liberalism has been devoured by its own offspring – security and the market. As for socialism, the revolutionary Marxist form has been largely discredited by the experience of the Soviet Union, and its parliamentary social democratic form, in imagining that it can temper the cold passions of the capitalist market, has ended up in an absolute capitulation to it.

However, in considering whether anarchism can offer any kind of alternative to these ideologies, we must pose the question: *what is anarchism as a form of politics?* Is there an anarchist political theory as such? Is anarchism more than simply the rejection of political authority, the rebellious impulse, or Bakunin's famous 'urge to destroy' – valuable as they are? Does anarchism have something distinct to offer political thought? This question, however, brings to the surface a certain paradox in anarchism, since anarchism has always considered itself an *anti*-politics. Anarchism has consciously sought the abolition of politics, and has imagined a sort of Manichean opposition between the *social principle* - constituted by natural law, and moral and rational conditions – and the *political principle*, which was the unnatural order of power. Therefore the abolition of the state was seen as the very abolition of politics itself, the revolt of society against politics. If this is the case, can anarchism still be considered a politics? Yes – because while calling for the abolition of politics, anarchists like Bakunin and Kropotkin also discussed revolutionary strategy,

the organisation and mobilisation of the masses, political programs, and the shape of post-revolutionary societies, all of which are, of course, *political* questions. What this paradox gives rise to, then, is a different conception of politics: a *politics that is conceived outside of and in opposition to the state*. The tension, central to anarchism, between anti-politics and politics, thus effects a dislodgement of politics from the state framework. The central challenge, then, is to think what politics means outside the ontological order of state sovereignty.

### A politics of anti-politics?

We therefore have to recognise that anarchism is not simply an anti-politics – it is also a politics. Let us formulate anarchism, then, as a *politics of anti-politics*, or an *anti-political politics*. However, this formulation raises certain conceptual difficulties for classical anarchism. We must more closely investigate the meaning of this aporia: what does politics mean in the context of anti-politics, and what does anti-politics mean in the context of politics? What kinds of constraints and limitations does one side of this formulation apply to the other; and what kinds of possibilities does it open up *for* the other?

Postanarchism might be seen as an exploration of this aporetic moment in anarchism. Postanarchism is not a specific form of politics; it offers no actual program or directives. It is not even a particular theory of politics as such. Nor should it be seen as an abandonment or movement beyond anarchism; it does not signify a 'being after' anarchism. On the contrary, postanarchism is a project of radicalising and renewing the politics of anarchism – of thinking anarchism *as* a politics. Let us understand postanarchism as a kind of *deconstruction*. Deconstruction is, for Jacques Derrida, a 'methodology' aimed at interrogating and unmasking the conceptual hierarchies, binary oppositions and aporias in philosophy – its moments of inconsistency and self-contradiction. Its purpose is to reveal the 'metaphysics of presence' that continues to haunt philosophical discourse. Deconstruction shows that no concept is a self-contained or self-sufficient unity: its identity is always dependent on another term which is disavowed, and whose presence at the same time destabilises the dominant term.

Similarly, postanarchism interrogates the metaphysics of presence that continues to haunt anarchism; it seeks to destabilise the foundationalism that classical anarchist thought rests on. Its deconstructive tools are poststructuralist thought and elements of psychoanalytic theory, tools through which I develop a critique of essentialist identities and deep ontological foundations. Some of the central categories and claims of classical anarchist thought are based on presuppositions which can no longer be theoretically sustained. These include: an essentialist conception of the subject; the universality of morality and reason, and the idea of the progressive enlightenment of humankind; a conception of the

social order as naturally constituted (by natural laws for instance) and rationally determined; a dialectical view of history; and a certain positivism, whereby science could reveal the truth of social relations. These ideas derive from the discourse of Enlightenment humanism, which the anarchism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was very much influenced by. My claim is that these ideas no longer have their full force; that they are part of a certain epistemological paradigm, a certain way of thinking and seeing the world which is increasingly problematic and difficult to sustain. This is not to say that the Enlightenment is out of date, but rather that its central tendencies must be reconsidered.

If we explore this moment of tension between politics and anti-politics as it applies to anarchism, we see that the moment of politics generates a number of conditions for anarchism. Politics suggests, for instance, some sort of engagement with relations of power. Following Michel Foucault's insight that power relations are pervasive, and constitutive of social identities, practices and discourses, then politics – even radical politics – is an activity conducted within a field structured by power. However, although we can never transcend power entirely – because there will always be power relations of some kind in any society – we can radically modify this field of power through ongoing practices of freedom. Furthermore, all forms of radical politics – especially anarchism which claims that power and authority are unnatural and inhuman – must contend with the possibility of the subject's psychic attachment to power, a desire for authority and self-domination that was revealed by psychoanalysis, from Freud to Reich. Therefore, if



the problem of voluntary servitude – so often neglected in radical political theory – is to be countered, the revolution against power and authority must involve a micro-political insurrection which takes place at the level of the subject's desire. Also, emphasising the political moment in anarchism would affirm the idea of contingency and the event, rather than a revolutionary narrative determined by the rational unfolding of social relations or historical laws. Revolutions and insurrections – even those which seek the abolition of formal politics – are *political* events which must be made; spontaneity requires conscious organisation and political mobilisation.

Where the political pole imposes certain limits – the realities of power, the dangers of voluntary servitude and so on – the anti-political pole, by contrast, invokes an outside, a movement beyond limits. It is the signification of the infinite, of the limitless horizon of possibilities. This is both the moment of utopia, and, in a different sense, also the moment of ethics. As I have suggested, anarchism has an important utopian dimension, even if the classical anarchists themselves claimed not to be utopians but materialists and rationalists. Indeed, some utopian element – whether acknowledged or not – is an essential part of any form of radical politics; to oppose the current order, one inevitably invokes an alternative, utopian imagination. However, we should try to formulate a different approach to utopianism: the importance of imagining an alternative to the current order is not to lay down a precise program for the future, but rather to provide a point of exteriority as a way of interrogating the limits of this order. Moreover, we should think about utopia in terms of action in the immediate sense, of creating

alternatives within the present, at localised points, rather than waiting for the revolution. Utopia is something which emerges in political struggles themselves.

Ethics also implies an outside to the existing order, but in a different sense. Ethics, as I understand it here, involves the opening up of existing political identities, practices, institutions and discourses to an Other which is beyond their terms. Ethics is more than the application of moral and rational norms – it is rather the continual disturbance of the sovereignty of these norms, and the identities and institutions which draw their legitimacy from them, in the name of something that exceeds their grasp. Importantly, then, ethics is what disturbs politics from the outside. This might be understood in the Levinasian sense of ‘an-archy’.<sup>1</sup> An-archy is not a politics on its own, and certainly cannot serve as a sovereign principle of social organisation. But this does *not* mean that it has no political effects - it is a kind of ethical distance from politics which nevertheless disturbs the political order, opening it up to alternatives, and this, from my point of view, is the political gesture *par excellence*.

The point is, however, that politics cannot do without anti-politics, and vice versa. The two must go together. There must always be an anti-political outside, a utopian moment of rupture and excess which disturbs the limits of politics. The ethical moment cannot be eclipsed by the political dimension; nor can it be separated from it, as someone like Carl Schmitt maintained. If there is to be a concept of the political, it can only be thought

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<sup>1</sup> See Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, trans., Alphonso Lingis, The Hague; London: Nijhoff, 1981, p. 194.

through a certain constitutive tension with ethics. At the same time, anti-politics needs to be politically articulated; it needs to be put into action through actual struggles and engagements with different forms of domination. There must be some way of politically measuring the anti-political imaginary, through victories, defeats, and strategic gains and reversals. So while anti-politics points to a transcendence of the current order, it cannot be an escape from it – it must involve an encounter with its limits, and this is where politics comes in. The transcendence of power involves an active engagement with power, not an avoidance of it; the realisation of freedom requires an ongoing elaboration of new practices of freedom within the context of power relations.

### **The autonomy of the political**

Indeed, in working through this aporia between politics and anti-politics, postanarchism gestures towards a new understanding of ‘the political’. Here Chantal Mouffe provides a useful definition of the political, distinguishing it from politics:

By “the political”, I refer to the dimension of antagonism that is inherent in human relations, antagonism that can take many forms and emerge in different types of social relations. ‘Politics’, on the other side, indicates an ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions which seek to establish a certain order and organize

human coexistence in conditions that are potentially conflictual because they are affected by the dimension of “the political”.<sup>2</sup>

So, in this conception, the political might be seen as the repressed unconscious of politics – the dimension of antagonism and conflict at the heart of social relations – which threatens to destabilise the established political order, and which therefore must be domesticated.

Mouffe’s conception of the political dimension as the realm of antagonism and conflict derives from Schmitt’s formulation of the political relation in terms of the friend/enemy opposition.<sup>3</sup> The existential threat posed to a certain political identity by the figure of the enemy, a threat which presupposes the possibility of war, and which unites a collective association in opposition to this enemy, is what distinguishes, for Schmitt, the political relationship from other relationships, such as economics, religion, morality and ethics.

This understanding of the political is fundamentally opposed, in Schmitt’s account, to liberalism, which is an attempt to evade or disavow the political dimension. According to Schmitt, liberalism is an anti-politics: in its distrust of the state it negates the political, displacing it with civil society, the sphere of individual private interests, law, economics, morality and rights. A similar critique is made by Schmitt of anarchism, which is also

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<sup>2</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, London: Verso, 2000, p. 101.

<sup>3</sup> See Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans., George Schwab, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

seen as an anti-politics that opposes the political state in the name of an intrinsically benign human nature.

How should a postanarchist approach respond to Schmitt's challenge? Does the opposition to the state, which is at the very core of anarchism, consign it to an apolitical liberalism, in which the sphere of individual interests eclipses the political dimension? My argument, to the contrary, is that postanarchism provides us with a new conception of the autonomy of the political, which transcends both the Schmittian and liberal paradigms.

The politics of postanarchism goes beyond the Schmittian conception in insisting that the appropriate domain of politics is not the state, but autonomous spaces that define themselves in opposition to it. For Schmitt, the nation state is the primary locus of politics because it is the sovereign state which decides on the friend/enemy distinction. However, from a postanarchist perspective, the state is actually the order of *de*-politicisation: it is the structure of power which polices politics, regulating, controlling and repressing the insurgent dimension that is proper to the political; it is a forgetting of the conflict and antagonism at the base of its own foundations. This critique of the circumscription of the political within the state order applies also to Mouffe, who, although seeming to embrace the idea of antagonism and disruption, particularly with her idea of agonistic democracy, confines this conflict implicitly to the national state framework. My contention would be that the democratic agonism, which Mouffe locates

within the state as a conflict over the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, actually realises itself only in opposition to the state. Thus, to speak of the autonomy of the political, as Schmitt and Mouffe do, necessarily invokes the idea of the *politics of autonomy*: the idea that politics seeks to define spaces of autonomy from the state, spaces in which people can determine their own lives, free from the looming shadow of Leviathan.

Postanarchism points to a different conception of the autonomy of the political, one that turns on its head the neo-Hobbesian, as well as Jacobin, traditions of political thought, for whom the political is nothing but the affirmation of the state.

Furthermore, postanarchism resists the Schmittian hyper-politicisation of politics, which seeks to evacuate ethics from the political domain. As I have said, politics has always to be thought in relation to ethics, as that which disturbs the sovereignty of politics (as well as the politics of sovereignty). Indeed, the moment of ethics acts to restrain the imperium of politics, the filling out of the ontological space by politics – something which leads not only to nihilism, but also to a paradoxical de-politicisation, as if politics expands everywhere to the point where it loses any sort of meaning. There can be no pure or total politics – or if there can, it can only have disastrous consequences. The intensification of the political threatens to produce a closed, claustrophobic, even totalitarian space in which politics itself disappears. Paradoxically, then, the autonomy of the political depends not on its separation from the ethical domain but on its constant engagement with, and openness to, it. The postanarchist conception of the political emphasises the necessary and constitutive ontological gap between politics and ethics.

At the same time, its anti-authoritarian impulse and its refusal of the purification of politics, does not make postanarchism liberalism. While postanarchism encompasses a certain moment of anti-politics, and while it shares with liberalism a suspicion of state authority and an insistence on individual freedom, it cannot be equated with liberalism. From a postanarchist point of view, liberalism does indeed subordinate the political to the orders of economics, morality and law – it leads to a de-politicisation, in which the political moment of action and contestation is swallowed up by the private interests and market preoccupations of civil society. Indeed, the problem with liberalism is that it naturalises society as a domain of individual freedom and market exchanges, without recognising the constraints that the latter impose on the former. Liberalism also subordinates the political domain to notions of universal human rights and humanitarianism. Schmitt was entirely right to be suspicious of such notions, saying that they conceal a new and concealed form of imperialism. At the same time, one could say that liberalism is not anti-political enough in the sense that it is not sufficiently opposed to the state. Liberalism's paean to individual freedom is contradicted by its acceptance of the state as the guardian of this freedom. So liberalism, from a postanarchist perspective, is neither sufficiently political, nor sufficiently anti-political.

It is obvious here that I am using the terms *political* and *anti-political* in a radically different sense to Schmitt. As I have said, I disagree with Schmitt in seeing the state as the privileged site of the political: the political is the constitution of a space of autonomy

which takes its distance from the state, and thus calls into question the very principle of state sovereignty. At the same time, the notion of the anti-political refers to the moment of both ethics and utopia, in which the boundaries of our political reality are challenged. And in this sense, the anti-political also implies a form of political engagement. One of the problems with the standard conceptions of the autonomy of the political – not only Schmitt's and Mouffe's, but also in a different sense, Hannah Arendt's – is that they forget, or actively disavow, this anti-political dimension. Anti-politics should not be confused with an indifference to politics, with a quiet passivity or a turning away from political engagement. Rather, it should be seen as an active refusal of the limits of what is in the name of what could be – and this is, of course, a highly political gesture. I see anti-politics as the *unconscious* of politics, and, in this sense, any conception of the political must include the anti-political and must wrestle with the paradoxical relation between these terms.