

Debating Postanarchism: Ontology, Ethics and Utopia

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In Chapter 4, I explored the relevance of anarchism to questions of radical politics today — particularly those arising within continental theory. Indeed, I suggested that many of themes and preoccupations of contemporary radical political thinkers — particularly the idea of a form of politics that is beyond state, party and class — reflect an unacknowledged anarchism. However, as I have shown, anarchism — in asserting an autonomous politics against the state — provides a more consistent theory of radical politics than that proposed by other thinkers. Central here is the rejection, in the name of greater revolutionary spontaneity, of the economic determinism, historical stagism and technological fetishism at the base of Hardt’s and Negri’s neoMarxist thesis. At the same time, anarchism refuses the desire to consecrate the political event in the form the Terror, a temptation that in the end only consecrates the state.

To propose an understanding of anarchism as that which asserts the autonomous dimension of politics might sound odd to some, particularly to anarchists themselves. Indeed, anarchism is usually seen as an *anti-politics*. Yet, as I have shown, anarchism has always found itself in the slightly paradoxical position of proposing the abolition of politics, while at the same time having to organise political movements and invent political strategies and programmes. Postanarchism works around this aporia between politics and anti-politics: indeed, it embodies the seemingly paradoxical position of a *politics of anti-politics*, or an anti-political politics, seeing this disjunction as generating new and productive articulations of politics and ethics. In this sense, the disjunction between politics and anti-politics is what might be called an ‘inclusive’ disjunction: a compound in which one proposition is true only if its opposing proposition is also true. Politics, at least in a radical, emancipatory sense, only has a consistent identity only if an anti-political, indeed utopian, dimension is also present — otherwise it remains caught within existing political frameworks and imaginaries. Conversely, anti-politics makes sense only if it takes seriously the tasks of politics: building, constructing, organising, fighting, making collective decisions and so on. Such practices are in no sense irreconcilable with libertarianism; on the contrary, they are its very condition. Put simply, a politics of anti-politics points to the possibility of a libertarian politics outside, and ultimately transcendent of, the state and all hierarchical structures of power and authority. To counteract such structures requires, however, the development of alternative libertarian and egalitarian structures and practices, coupled with a constant awareness of the authoritarian potential that lies in *any* structure.

Postanarchism also points to the productive disjuncture or tension between politics and ethics. On the one hand, it refuses attempts to eclipse politics in the name of ethics: a project that might be found, for example, in various global humanitarian and human rights ideologies; although here we should not discount the emancipatory potential of certain rights discourses, such as those supporting indigenous rights claims, or those of ‘illegal’ migrants, for instance. At the same time, a postanarchist perspective refuses to supplant ethics with politics entirely or to see politics as occupying a different domain to ethics. As we have seen, it opposes the Schmittian preoccupation with pure politics, in which politics is constructed as a power game played between antagonistic forces,

friends and enemies. This paradigm reifies sovereignty and the state, and often plays itself out as a form of violent realpolitik. Rather, politics must be conditioned by ethics, not as a Heavenly tribunal that dispenses judgement, but as something which disrupts — in a Levinasian an-archic sense, as described in Chapter 2 — sovereign political identities, opening them to the possibilities of the Other.

Poststructuralism and Anarchism

In this chapter, I will further clarify and elaborate a politics and ethics of postanarchism. I will do so by making clear the distinctions between postanarchism and other contemporary anarchist perspectives. I will suggest here that despite a number of important differences, much recent anarchist thought continues to work within the epistemological paradigm of classical anarchism, within its humanist and rationalist presuppositions. While I have argued that we cannot simply abandon these ideas, or the Enlightenment paradigm in which they were articulated, we should at least subject them to greater critical scrutiny. Moreover, as I shall show in this chapter, some of their limitations and inconsistencies become apparent when we look at how these categories continue to inform modern anarchist thought. Here we must stress that postanarchism is a moment of both continuity and discontinuity with classical anarchism: it retains from classical anarchism its equalibertarian political ethos, its desire for revolt and its vision of a society of free association; while at the same time questioning classical anarchism's ontological and epistemological foundations. It is this movement beyond foundationalism, however, which places postanarchism on highly contested grounds within contemporary anarchist theory. Indeed, as we shall see, the influence of postmodernism, or, as I prefer to call it, poststructuralism, on anarchist thought,¹ has been strongly resisted by a number of important anarchist theorists.

In some ways, as I suggested previously, postanarchism can be seen as a response to the postmodern condition. While I have proposed that we take a certain cautious distance from postmodernism — a term that has been loosely and often unreflectively deployed in a wide variety of domains — we should nevertheless take account of a number of its key implications, particularly on the question of deep ontological foundations. To be more specific, anarchist thought should take into account several major insights from poststructuralist theory (and here I include deconstruction and Lacanian psychoanalysis), insights which I believe can be incorporated into an anarchist politics without losing or distorting its main tenets or principles:

(1) We should adopt, with Lyotard, a degree of scepticism towards metanarratives. In other words, we must subject to closer critical scrutiny the idea that there are uni-

¹ Here I refer not only to my own work, but also to that of other poststructuralist-inspired anarchist thinkers, such as Todd May and Lewis Call. See, respectively, *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism* (Philadelphia, PA: Penn State Press, 1994); and *Postmodern Anarchism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003).

versal moral and rational perspectives, or that there is a certain dialectical movement of historical forces that determines social relations. These notions are deemed to be totalising in the sense that they reduce, dismiss or repress differences and singularities. However, importantly, this does not mean that we must abandon a universal dimension for politics: simply that we can no longer regard this dimension as immanent, natural or historically determined; rather, it is something that must be deliberately constructed. Nor does this scepticism towards metanarratives mean that we descend into nihilism, irrationalism or moral relativism, as poststructuralists are so often accused of. I shall explore this question later on in the chapter.

(2) We should also abandon the notion of essential identities: in other words, the idea that there is a constant, stable set of properties, characteristics and potentialities at the base of social identities and relations. Social identities are not necessarily fixed or stable; indeed, they are often indeterminate. The Man of Enlightenment humanism, the figure endowed with certain moral and rational characteristics or potentialities which would emerge as part of an historical process or a development of social forces, can no longer serve as an entirely convincing basis for politics. This does not mean that we reject ‘humanity’, or that we risk propagating inhumanity, but rather that we think about humanity in different and more diverse ways. Nor does it mean that we reject the idea of society itself or collective identities, but rather that social identities are contingent and discursively constructed.

(3) We therefore place a certain emphasis on the role of language and discourse in constituting social relations, practices and identities. However, rather than accepting the structuralist position that language is a fixed, totalising, all-determining system without an outside, we point to the way that discursive structures are themselves unstable, and often fragmented and incomplete. So, although the subject is conditioned by language as an external structure, he or she is not determined by it in an absolute sense and, therefore, has a large degree of autonomy and free agency. To point to the constitutive role of language does not mean that the subject is abandoned or reduced to a fixed ‘position’ within a structure. Discursive structures operate as both constraints on and conditions for freedom.

(4) Lastly, we accept the Foucauldian insight that power is constitutive (rather than simply repressive) and that it is more pervasive than we had perhaps imagined. To argue that power is coextensive with social relations and that it plays some role in constituting and defining social identities and practices, does not mean that politics is impossible or that domination is insurmountable, as many have alleged. Rather, it means that the revolutionary narrative is made somewhat more complicated and problematic, and that the ‘game of freedom’, to use Foucault’s expression, is played within and against certain constraints.

These key points, which are incorporated into a postanarchist perspective, create certain difficulties for classical anarchism as I have already pointed out. In particular, they render problematic the notion of a rational social essence that unfolds and develops, either dialectically or in an evolutionary way, towards a harmonisation of

social forces and the final liberation of humanity. However, at the same time, I do not consider these theoretical conditions to be either politically disabling or incompatible with anarchism. Rather, they mean simply that we must think about politics generally, and anarchist politics in particular, in new ways.

Social Anarchism of Lifestyle Anarchism?

However, the poststructuralist ideas outlined above have inspired criticism in recent years from a number of anarchist thinkers, who have argued that they are antithetical to anarchism, robbing it of any effective normative basis for political action and consigning it to nihilism, irrationalism and moral relativism.² Indeed, despite their major differences, two major contemporary anarchist figures, Murray Bookchin and John Zerzan, are united in their condemnation of postmodernism/ poststructuralism.

Bookchin, in his polemic, *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism*, contends that anarchism is currently at a crossroads, confronted with two alternative articulations, between which there is an ‘unbridgeable chasm’. These alternatives are a ‘lifestyle’ anarchism which centres around an irresponsible, selfish and nihilistic desire for personal autonomy and individual expression; and ‘social’ anarchism, which is a more politically committed, collectivist-oriented project of what Bookchin calls ‘social freedom’. Whereas the latter retains the best traditions of socialist anarchism, exemplified by anarchists like Bakunin and Kropotkin, and embodied in the Spanish collectives and the libertarian workers movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the former, into which category Bookchin places Stirner, Godwin, Nietzsche, Foucault, Emma Goldman and especially Hakim Bey, ‘takes flight from all meaningful social activism and a steadfast commitment to lasting and creative projects by dissolving into kicks, postmodernist nihilism, and a dizzying Nietzschean sense of elitist superiority’.³ The central thrust of his critique is that a certain individualistic, hedonistic and liberal-inspired strain has developed within anarchism, which has been influenced by different sources — such as existentialism (Stirner) and postmodernism (Foucault); which has taken different forms — such as Bey’s anarcho-mysticism and Zerzan’s primitivism; and which threatens to turn anarchism into a nihilistic, apolitical and narcissistic personal rebellion of disaffected bourgeois youth. What is in danger of being lost in this miasma of mysticism and hedonism, according to Bookchin, is the collectivist legacy of anarchism, in which questions of egalitarianism and social responsibility, rather than personal liberation, were at the forefront of revolutionary concerns, and in which

² Other anarchist thinkers, however, have recognised the importance of poststructuralist theory for renewing anarchism. See for instance, Day’s *Gramsci is Dead*. See also David Morland’s essay, ‘Anti-capitalism and poststructuralist anarchism’, in *Changing Anarchism: Anarchist Theory and Practice in a Global Age*, Jonathan Purkis and James Bowen (ed.) (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), pp. 23–54

³ Murray Bookchin, *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism: an Unbridgeable Chasm* (San Francisco, CA: AK Press, 1995).

politics was guided by sound Enlightenment-based rationalist principles. Particularly threatening to this rational legacy, then, is postmodernism, which, in Bookchin's view, celebrates irrationalism and relativism, and abandons revolutionary projects in favour of personal insurrections against localised sites of power.

There is much that could be said about Bookchin's polemic. It does betray a rather hopeless nostalgia for what Bookchin imagines to be a more authentic anarchism of the past. One also finds a kind of moral Puritanism here, in which the sense of social responsibility that supposedly characterised the early workers' and socialist movements,⁴ is counterpoised to the stereotypical image of rebellious youth, with their 'lifestyle zines' and destructive, nihilistic tendencies. This critique of what Bookchin imagines to be the egotistical irresponsibility and narcissistic self-indulgence of young people seems much at odds with his earlier critical writings on Marxism, in which he rejected as out of date the old model of the proletarian movement, proposing in its place new forms of libertarian politics based on the possibilities of a 'post-scarcity' and post-class society.⁵ Furthermore, it is surely wrong to dismiss the recent forms of politics emerging with the anti-capitalist movement as simply 'lifestyle' politics, even though it is a politics no longer based strictly on class. Surely it would be contemptuous and unfair in the extreme to dismiss the many young people who participate in radical politics today as hedonistic egotists seeking destruction for its own sake, simply because they are not part of an identifiable working-class movement and may have read a bit too much Foucault and Debord for Bookchin's liking. Rather than their being driven by an irresponsible and selfish egoism or a nihilistic individualism, as Bookchin claims, the actions and practices of young activists today suggest precisely the opposite: an an-archic sense of solidarity and responsibility for those around the world exploited and excluded by global Capital.⁶

While Bookchin wrote this polemic several years before the 'Battle of Seattle' (1999) and the appearance of a global anti-capitalist movement, his spurious distinction between 'social' and 'lifestyle' anarchism is a gesture that is dismissive of new forms of anarchist politics and radical political practices that are no longer based solely on the labour movement and strictly defined working-class identities.

Furthermore, one should reject the distinction Bookchin makes between autonomy and freedom. Here he claims that while traditional 'social' anarchism sought *freedom*, which was understood collectively and socially, 'lifestyle' anarchism by contrast seeks a

⁴ Here Bookchin asserts the slogan from the First International: 'No rights without duties, no duties without rights', sounding almost like a slogan for New Labour. (*Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism*, pp. 51–2).

⁵ See Bookchin, 'Listen Marxist!', *Post-Scarcity Anarchism*.

⁶ A similar point has been made by Simon Crichtley, whose notion of 'anarchic metapolitics' embodies an ethics of responsibility: 'The conception of anarchism that I seek to defend, and which I think is what we find on the ground in activist practice, is not so much organized around freedom as around *responsibility*, an infinite responsibility that arises in relation to a situation of injustice.' *Infinately Demanding*, p. 93

more ‘liberal’ notion of *autonomy*, based on the model of possessive individualism and embodying a selfish disregard for the needs of others. While freedom, for Bookchin, is socially-situated and an expression of collective egalitarian aspirations, autonomy is individualistic, solipsistic and often irresponsible, ranging from Stirnerian ‘egoism’, New Age spiritualism and self-development, to bourgeois yuppie ‘me-ism’. We should point out, however, that this distinction between individual-based autonomy and socially- or collectively-based freedom was never part of classical anarchism. Even the anarchists whom Bookchin recruits on the side of collectivist social freedom — Kropotkin and Bakunin — never saw this as being in any sense irreconcilable with personal autonomy. Indeed, the two went hand-in-hand. As Bakunin said: ‘I have in mind this liberty of everyone which, far from finding itself checked by the freedom of others, is, on the contrary, confirmed by it and extended to infinity.’⁷ While this liberty was socially conditioned, emerging through an interaction of individuals with the social and natural forces of which they were a part, it was never meant to imply a collectivist subordination of the individual’s liberty to social needs. Rather, the anarchist idea of freedom embodies and, indeed, maximises (‘extended to infinity’) the idea of individual liberty or autonomy, refusing to see it in opposition to the liberty of others or to the desire for social equality.

So, rather than finding an opposition between individual liberty (or autonomy) and social needs, I prefer to think in terms of ‘equaliberty’. As I proposed in Chapter 1, equal-liberty implies the inextricability of liberty and equality, and refuses to see an opposition between individual freedom and collective, egalitarian freedom, between the one and the many; any constraint on one involves a constraint on the other. Indeed, I see this principle of equal-liberty as being central to anarchism, distinguishing it from liberalism, on the one hand, and socialism, on the other hand. Both these alternative ideologies imagine a tension between the individual and society, and between liberty and equality: liberalism tends to subordinate social needs to individual needs, and equality to liberty; while socialism tends to do the opposite. It is only anarchism that refuses this opposition. Bookchin, in resurrecting this distinction, and in attributing it, incorrectly, to the tradition of classical anarchism — or at least to some of its key proponents — betrays his socialist, rather than anarchist, leanings. Indeed, to equate the idea of individual autonomy with a bourgeois possessive individualism is something that even Marx rejected. Marx showed how this was an incredibly limited and ultimately self-contradictory way of thinking about freedom — boiling down to notions of private property, free trade and the freedom to exploit others — and that the abolition of bourgeois individualism under communism meant not the abolition of individual freedom and autonomy, or the subordination of the individual to the collective, but, on the contrary, an extension of the realm of individual autonomy, self-determination and freedom of expression beyond these narrow confines.⁸ To see, as

⁷ Bakunin, *Political Philosophy*, p. 270.

⁸ See Marx and Engels, ‘The Communist Manifesto’, pp. 485–6.

Bookchin does, notions of individual autonomy and liberty as being strictly part of the liberal tradition of Locke and John Stuart Mill, ignores the way in which individualism has a completely different resonance and importance in the radical tradition.

Here we should also reject Bookchin's equation of poststructuralist thinkers like Foucault, as well as Stirner, with liberalism and with liberal understandings of individualism. The importance of poststructuralist thought is in showing that the liberal, bourgeois individual is neither as consistent or autonomous as he or she imagines; that, as Foucault shows, the individual is often an 'effect' of relations of power, knowledge and regimes of truth that construct an identity for him or her. Indeed, this is precisely why Foucault questions the whole individualist discourse of personal rebellion and sexual liberation: because the 'essential self' that seeks to be liberated, or the Man of bourgeois rights and freedoms, 'is already in himself the effect of a subjection far more profound than himself'.⁹ So, far from supporting the narcissistic rebellion of the self against power, as Bookchin claims, Foucault shows us that the project of personal liberation must be treated with much more caution. Similarly, with Stirner, we find not, as Bookchin suggests, a celebration of bourgeois individualism, but precisely a radical questioning of this subject. Indeed, for Stirner, the idea of the rational, utility maximising bourgeois individual is a constraint upon the much more radical possibilities of ego: here the ego should not be confused with the self-interested *homo economicus* of liberalism — this in itself is an abstraction of humanist and liberal discourses — but rather should be seen as a kernel of nothingness out of which different expressions of the 'self' can arise. Thus, Stirner's individualism is much too radical and idiosyncratic to be confined to the liberal conception.

While Bookchin makes some valid points about the apolitical emptiness and vapidness of certain New Age spiritual motifs of 'self-fulfilment' — to which we can only respond that these have nothing to do with a poststructuralist-inspired anarchism in any case — his thesis should in general be refuted. Anarchism, as I have suggested, sees no opposition between the collective interests of society and individual need for autonomy. To dismiss the latter as a bourgeois 'lifestyle' preoccupation has no legitimate basis in anarchist thought. The 'unbridgeable chasm' that he erects between 'social' and 'lifestyle' anarchism is an imaginary one, born of his own disdain for new, emergent forms of anarchism. Here, Bob Black refers to a certain 'paradigm shift' — in the Kuhnian sense — between the older, classical anarchism, represented in its last gasp by Bookchin, and what he terms New Anarchism, which he sees as consciously hedonistic, anti-political and post-leftist.¹⁰ While I agree that there has been a certain shift to new understandings of anarchism — although here the notion of the paradigm shift is too strong to describe moments of both continuity and discontinuity with classical anarchism — and while I agree that Bookchin should be seen as part of the classical

⁹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1991).

¹⁰ See Bob Black, *Anarchy after Leftism* (Colombia, MO: CAL Press, 1997), pp. 144–50

anarchist tradition, I do not see this ‘shift’ as occurring on the same terrain as Black does. That is to say, the difference between classical and ‘new’ — or as I prefer to call it ‘post’ — anarchism, is not between one that is political and ‘leftist’, and one that is hedonistic, anti-political and ‘post-leftist’. This is in some senses to reflect Bookchin’s own highly spurious distinction. If by ‘anti-political’ Black means ‘post-political’, in the sense of no longer being politically engaged, then he is certainly wrong. As I have suggested, the anti-political gesture does not mean an avoidance or withdrawal from political struggles, but rather the revolutionary abolition of formal politics and power (particularly in its statist form), and this is also obviously a *political* gesture; this is why it only makes sense to see anti-politics — even in its utopian dimension — as a certain type of politics. Furthermore, it makes no sense to me to see contemporary forms of anarchism as ‘post-leftist’, if by ‘post-leftist’ is meant an abandonment of the radical horizon of emancipation. While contemporary anarchism might be ‘post-leftist’ in the sense that it is no longer closely affiliated with the labour movement or the socialist tradition, it obviously still retains an anti-capitalist and egalitarian agenda.

Therefore, if there has been a ‘shift’ from classical to contemporary anarchism, it has taken place on a different terrain: on an *ontological* terrain. In other words, there has been an ‘an-archic’ dislodgement of the deep foundations of classical anarchist thought, a disturbance of its epistemological categories. As outlined above, we can no longer subscribe to ideas about human essence, the dialectic or the rational development of social forces. The ‘paradigm shift’ away from classical anarchism, therefore, involves an abandonment of the notion of the rational social object that formed the basis of its ethics and its revolutionary philosophy. Postanarchism refers to the orientation of anarchist theory and practice around precisely this rejection of a rational social totality.

The Ontology of ‘Social Ecology’

This notion of a rational social totality, and the reasons why it should be abandoned, become clearer if we turn once again to Bookchin, who, as I have argued, may be considered part of the classical anarchist tradition. Bookchin’s central concept and programme of ‘social ecology’ embodies the idea that at the base of social relations there is a certain immanent and historically determined unfolding of rational and ethical capacities, which form part of what he calls an ‘ecology of freedom’. This is an argument that closely parallels the developmental philosophies of classical nineteenth-century anarchists, in which one finds a certain narrative of freedom and progress driven by an unfolding of a social totality — an essence or capacity that is immanent within society, and whose emergence will bring about a rational harmonisation of social forces and the full humanisation of Man.

The same type of narrative can be found in Bookchin’s *Ecology of Freedom*. Here he outlines a project of reconciling libertarian socialist — or anarchist — principles with the needs and prerogatives of an ‘ecological society’. This involves harmonising

humanity or the human-made universe (what he refers to as *second nature*) with non-human nature (*first nature*). The dialectical interaction between these two dimensions produces a rational synthesis which Bookchin calls a *third nature*: that is, a more complete, thinking nature in which are combined the principles of unity and diversity. This interaction takes place on the terrain of a rational wholeness or totality which was always immanent, although hitherto not fully realised:

What makes unity in diversity in nature more than a suggestive ecological metaphor for unity in diversity in society is the underlying philosophical concept of wholeness. By wholeness, I mean varying levels of actualization, an unfolding of a wealth of particularities, that are latent in an as-yet-undeveloped potentiality. This potentiality may be a newly planted seed, a newly born infant, a newly born community, or a newly born society.¹¹

Bookchin stresses that this notion of wholeness is not homogenising, but embodies a dynamic interaction of natural and social forces and particularities. However, the point is that this interaction of forces is determined dialectically as part of an unfolding rationality that is immanent in nature. Here Bookchin invokes Hegel's maxim, "the True is the whole", inverting it into the "the whole is the True":

One can take this reversal of terms to mean that the true lies in the self-consummation of a process through which its development, in the flowering of its latent particularities into their fullness or wholeness, just as the potentialities of a child achieve expression in the wealth of experiences and physical growth that enter into childhood.¹²

Bookchin elsewhere refers to this logic of unfolding as *dialectical naturalism*: the process by which a certain latent potentiality is realised, developing itself into its proper wholeness of fullness.¹³ Bookchin's central thesis in his concept of social ecology is, therefore, the idea that the possibilities of a free society — a society without hierarchy and alienation — are contained within nature itself; moreover, they are unfolding in a rational way through a certain dynamic interaction between humanity and nature. This will culminate in a reconciliation between humanity and nature, and the realisation by human societies of libertarian and non-hierarchical principles of organisation which were already part of the natural order: 'Our continuity with non-hierarchical nature suggests that a non-hierarchical society is no less random than an ecosystem.'¹⁴ Thus, the project of human freedom must be situated in relation to the natural world from which it emerges; its realisation is the fulfilment of a natural rational destiny, and a harmonisation of human with natural society.

¹¹ Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom: the Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy* (Paolo Alto, CA: Cheshire Books, 1982), p. 31.

¹² Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom*, p. 32.

¹³ See Murray Bookchin, *The Philosophy of Social Ecology: Essays on Dialectical Naturalism* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1990), p. 28.

¹⁴ Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom*, p. 37.

This notion of the ripening of the conditions of human freedom through a rational process of enlightenment and social development is entirely consistent with classical anarchism. Here we might think of Bakunin's idea that freedom develops in accordance with natural laws, and that its realisation is possible only with the gradual discernment, through scientific observation and rational enquiry, of the way in which these laws constitute our very beings: 'In respect to Nature this is for man the only possible dignity and freedom. There will never be any other freedom; for natural laws are immutable and inevitable.'¹⁵ Similarly, for Kropotkin, the principles of sociability and cooperation, which are the foundations upon which a free and ethical society are to be built, are found first in the natural world, where they function as principles of evolutionary survival among animal species. However, in these narratives, as in Bookchin's, there is a certain antagonism between these libertarian and mutualist principles rooted in nature and the forces of authoritarianism and hierarchy — forces which will nevertheless be overcome through a process of rational enlightenment and social revolution. Moreover, these narratives do not propose a simple return to nature, but, rather, seek to take advantage of technological developments and scientific progress to better harness and implement these natural principles.

However, can we assume that the possibilities of human freedom lie rooted in the natural order, as a secret waiting to be discovered, as a flower waiting to blossom, to use Bookchin's metaphor? Can we assume that there is a rational unfolding of possibilities, driven by a certain historical and social logic? This would seem to fall into the trap of essentialism, whereby there is a rational essence or being at the foundation of society whose truth we must perceive. There is an implicit positivism here, in which political and social phenomena are seen as conditioned by natural principles and scientifically observable conditions. Here I think one should reject this view of a social order founded on deep rational principles. In the words of Stirner, 'The essence of the world, so attractive and splendid, is for him who looks to the bottom of it — emptiness.'¹⁶ In other words, rather than there being a rational objectivity at the foundation of society, an immanent wholeness embodying the potential for human freedom, there is a certain void or emptiness, one that produces radical contingency and indeterminacy rather than scientific objectivity. This idea has been elaborated by Laclau and Mouffe, who eschew the idea of society as a rationally intelligible totality, and instead see it as a field of antagonisms which function as its discursive limit. In other words, what gives society its definitional limit at the same time subverts it as a coherent, whole identity. Therefore, they argue, 'Society never manages fully to be society, because everything in it is penetrated by its limits, which prevent it from constituting itself as an objective reality.'¹⁷ Antagonism should not be thought of here in the sense of the Hobbesian state of nature, as a war of everyman against everyman, but rather as

¹⁵ Bakunin, *Political Philosophy*, p. 94

¹⁶ Stirner, *The Ego and its Own*, p. 40.

¹⁷ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, p. 127.

a kind of rupturing or displacement of social identities that prevents the closure of society as a coherent identity.

To assert the indeterminacy and openness of social identities does not undermine the possibilities of radical politics. Anarchism does not require deep ontological foundations, such as those offered by Bookchin's concept of social ecology. On the contrary, this sort of foundationalism constrains politics by grounding it in a biological determinacy and an organic vision of society. My contention here is that we should no longer think of the politics of freedom and emancipation in these terms. To presuppose a harmonious, rational social order as the fundamental programme of politics, and to see this as being already immanent within social relations, entails the very closure of politics. It aims at a certain stabilisation, and, indeed, domestication of the political. Rather than seeing radical politics as part of a rational process, as moments in the unfolding of an objective totality, we should see it as unpredictable points of rupture with the existing social order. If we were to take Ranciere's position here, we can see this idea of a determined social order as the order of 'the police', in opposition to which politics is always a moment of rupture, displacement and exteriority.¹⁸ For Ranciere, politics is democracy. However, democracy here has nothing to do with a stable regime of institutions, practices, identities and rights, but rather refers to the moment of dissonance or disjuncture created when the *demos* — the part that is excluded from the social and political order — demands to be included, and, importantly, does so on the basis of the presupposition of equality with the whole of the community. It is not, therefore, a matter of the smooth incorporation of a certain part into the whole, but rather the disjuncture between a part which has no place — the poor, illegal immigrants, for instance — and the order which cannot accommodate this part without disordering itself.

With certain qualifications, I regard Ranciere's view of politics as being extremely useful for a rethinking of anarchism. This is because he sees politics itself as an *an-archic* displacement of the order of parts, semblances and identities. Can we speak, then, of an *an-archic* displacement of anarchism itself? This is what I have endeavoured to capture with the idea of postanarchism: a destabilisation of the ontological foundations and essential identities of anarchism. Furthermore, could we say, with Ranciere, that any social order, even one based on anarchist principles, would be an order of the police? By 'police', Ranciere is not referring to the coercive apparatuses of the state, but to a rational ordering of places, roles and identities within any community based on a certain 'distribution of the sensible': that is, a certain regime of signs that determines what is perceptible and what is not.¹⁹ If we take this argument, we would have to concede that any form of social organisation will involve relations of power and exclusion — such relations are coextensive with society as such. No doubt the struc-

¹⁸ See Jacques Ranciere, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

¹⁹ See Jacques Ranciere, *The Politics of Aesthetics: the Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Continuum, 2004).

tures and contours of an anarchist community or society would be much more open, less exclusionary and restrictive, and more democratic than those of other societies. Yet, an anarchist politics must still be aware of the risk of new forms of power emerging in societies supposedly liberated from power. This does not mean, of course, that the project of building autonomous, libertarian communities is pointless and should be abandoned; rather, that anarchism should also be seen as an ethics in which power is continually problematised, and where borders are continually contested. Anarchism should remain sensitive to the possibilities of domination and to the inevitability of dissent and disagreement.

If we examine, for instance, Bookchin's idea of municipalism as the basis for a new politics of citizenship and democratic decision making, we find many interesting and appealing ideas for libertarian institutions and practices, including forms of council democracy and decentralisation. However, there is little acknowledgement of the possibility of new forms of power and exclusion emerging with such institutions. For instance, the category of citizenship, which often perpetuates such pervasive practices of exclusion and securitisation, is never really questioned or deconstructed in his account. Instead, we are presented with an image of the political structure of a rational ecological society of the future. As part of this confederalist vision, Bookchin invokes as

examples of an 'authentic politics' models of political participation from Athenian democracy and New England town meetings, as well as the Arendtian and Aristotelian motifs of the properly political life.²⁰ While an anarchist politics can certainly draw upon the democratic forms and practices of the past, the problem lies more in the way that this confederalist vision of Bookchin's is imagined as part of a dialectical totality of social and political interdependencies that unfolds towards its own self-realisation.²¹ This confederalist model is thus confirmed as the only political form a liberated society can take. However, if we are to understand anarchism not only as a way of thinking about future forms of a free society, but also as an an-archic disturbance of *all* political forms, then we would have to insist on a certain constitutive openness and a space of contestation and disagreement.

In considering Bookchin's politics, then, we should pay close attention to Ranciere's critical analysis of classical anarchism:

Historical anarchism oscillated between two fundamental attitudes: on the one hand it brought together the capacity for inventiveness of humans in association with schemas of historical evolution advanced by Marxist science. On the other, it presented itself, in the Proudhonian tradition, as the bearer of true social science, and of a social formula ready for future application ... Murray Bookchin, for his part, seems to me to perpetuate the organicist vision to which anarchism has often been linked, a vision

²⁰ Murray Bookchin, *From Urbanization to Cities: Towards a New Politics of Citizenship* (London: Cassell, 1995), p. 60.

²¹ See Bookchin, *From Urbanization to Cities*, pp. 254–5.

according to which the just society would be like a natural vegetable well embedded in its soil. This also means that he presents the anarchist solution as the application of a formula which is supposed to be a cure for the sickness of the state. I, for my part, do not believe in phrases ready-made for future application. I believe that there are current forms of opposition to the existing order which are developing future forms of being in common. The anarchist critique and forms of association linked to the anarchist tradition certainly take on a new importance since the failure of State Marxism and socialist parties. But this implies thinking the thing that historical anarchism judged contradictory: an anarchist political thought, an idea of anarchism as practical politics.²²

If anarchism is to be seen as a *politics* in this sense, rather than as developmental narrative consecrated by scientific knowledge and natural law, then we would have to reject the ontological categories upon which Bookchin's political vision is founded. Because Bookchin's politics of social ecology is absolutised and made certain through the dialectic and through a rational, organic objectivity, it effects a closure of politics. To see anarchism as a 'practical politics' rather than as a social science, means that anarchism is practiced without these dialectical guarantees and naturalistic foundations; the emphasis is on contingency and practical innovation, rather than on understanding the organic basis and the rational *telos* of the story of human liberation. This move from a science of deep foundations to a politics of practices and contingencies is central to postanarchism.

Anarchism as Primitivism

If we are to question the idea of anarchism as a discourse of rational progress and dialectical development, should we then see it as an anti-civilisational politics opposed to the very notion of progress? This is precisely the position adopted by the anarcho-primitivist, John Zerzan, who engages in a radical critique of civilisation in the name of a pre-civilisational Golden Age: that is, an image of man in Palaeolithic times as naturally free and unencumbered by the constraints of modern society. Zerzan's argument here is seemingly the direct opposite of Bookchin's: while the latter affirms the idea of technological innovation and progress, locating the possibilities of human liberation in a future ecological society, the former has an utterly dystopian vision of modernity, harkening back instead to a prelapsarian time of total freedom and oneness with nature, a state which it was our misfortune to ever abandon. For Zerzan, the hope of human liberation lies in a total destruction of technology and the trappings of civilisation, and a return to a primitive existence: an insurrection of the future

²² Jacques Ranciere, 'Democracy, anarchism and radical politics today: An interview with Jacques Ranciere', conducted by Todd May, Benjamin Noys and Saul Newman, trans. John Lechte, *Anarchist Studies*, 16(2), 2008, pp. 173–85 at 176–7.

primitive.²³ Moreover, it is because of his anti-civilisational stance, and his dystopian rejection of technology and the idea of progress, that Zerzan is condemned as a nihilistic ‘lifestyle’ anarchist in Bookchin’s aforementioned polemic. Yet, these two thinkers have more in common than it may appear: they both hang on to the Enlightenment desire for *social fullness*. That is, the idea of a rational social harmony and the overcoming of alienation. Bookchin seeks this social fullness in the future, while Zerzan finds it in the past.

This similarity becomes more evident in their mutual opposition to postmodernism/poststructuralism. Like Bookchin, Zerzan equates postmodernism with nihilism, irrationalism and relativism. He refers to it as a ‘catastrophe’, arguing that it simply mirrors the abstraction, fragmentation and loss of reality generated by contemporary hyper-capitalism and consumerism. However, aside from the problematic conflation of a certain pop-culture notion of postmodernism — which I would agree largely consists in a fetishisation of capitalism and is incapable of providing any effective critique of it — with poststructuralism, which I see as more politically engaged, it is curious that Zerzan condemns postmodernism for its assault on Enlightenment humanism: ‘Postmodernism subverts two of the over-arching tenets of Enlightenment humanism: the power of language to shape the world and the power of consciousness to shape a self.’²⁴ Yet surely the discourse of Enlightenment humanism, with its ideas of the rationally conscious individual and human emancipation, are products of the very civilisation that Zerzan so violently rejects. Indeed, in another essay, Zerzan claims that language itself is alienating and repressive because it abstracts us from the more immediate and authentic relationship with the world;²⁵ and yet he condemns postmodernism for undermining the power of language to shape the world. In what sense would rationality, and Enlightenment humanist notions of the autonomous subject, have any sort of meaning at all in the primitive, pre-linguistic societies Zerzan admires?

Such moments of self-contradiction aside, what becomes apparent in Zerzan’s critique of postmodernism is the desire to preserve some notion of authenticity and presence; the idea that there is an essential reality — the thing in itself — beyond discourse and representation. What postmodernism undermines and disrupts, according to Zerzan, is the possibility of an authentic relationship with the world, a sensory appreciation of the real which is unmediated by language. The effect of strategies like deconstruction, according to Zerzan, is to make impossible ‘unmediated contact or communication, only signs and representations; deconstruction is a search for presence and fulfilment interminably, necessarily, deferred’.²⁶ This is why Zerzan is also critical of Lacanian psychoanalysis, as it shows that pre-symbolic *jouissance* is impossible and unattainable because it is outside the order of language and representation.

²³ See John Zerzan, *Future Primitive and Other Essays* (New York: Autonomedia, 1994).

²⁴ See Zerzan, *Future Primitive*, p. 108.

²⁵ See Zerzan, ‘Language: Origin and Meaning’, *Elements of Refusal* (Columbia, MO: CAL Press, 1999).

²⁶ Zerzan, *Future Primitive*, p. 117.

Zerzan's desire to return to some authentic relationship with the world, some unmediated experience of the present, is like the desire to return to the pre-Oedipal state of bliss: the unmediated, harmonious enjoyment (*jouissance*) with the mother prior to the alienating intervention of the paternal signifier. Indeed, his descriptions of primitive hunter-gatherer societies in Palaeolithic times, for whom the constraints of civilisation, the burdens of gender and economic hierarchies and the violence and alienations of capitalism, technology and the division of labour were unknown, were societies of bliss, innocence and harmony, in which one experienced an authentic and immediate relationship with the natural environment. To live such an undomesticated existence, without technology, without involuntary work, without family structures, without even language and symbolic representation, is to experience a genuine freedom and a complete oneness with the world. According to Zerzan, such primitive hunter-gatherer societies were societies of leisure, abundance and egalitarianism.

This idea of a lost state of innocent enjoyment and authenticity has a powerful resonance today in the face of the pervasive intrusions and constraints of our technologically-saturated societies. Here we should not dismiss of the value of Zerzan's dystopian critique. We do, indeed, live a domesticated existence in our time of biopolitical capitalism, with its continual deployment of technologies of surveillance and control, its cynical commodification and manipulation of biological life itself and its devastation of the natural environment. Societies in the developed world increasingly resemble giant, hi-tech prisons, with their surveillance cameras, databases, biometric technologies and their enclosure of the commons. Are we not all haunted by the desire to destroy the chains that bind us, to escape these confines, to roam freely in wildness of a state of nature? Does not the desire to escape domestication recur as a powerful social fantasy? Indeed, this is how we should approach Zerzan's vision of authentic primitive societies. They should not be seen as actually existing societies; despite the abundance of anthropological studies that Zerzan cites as evidence for their existence, this is all pure speculation. Rather they should be seen as a kind of utopia, an antipolitical imaginary of freedom and autonomy that serves as a powerful basis for the critique of contemporary conditions. As Zerzan says, referring to the myth of the Golden Age, 'Eden, or whatever name it goes by, was the home of our primeval forager ancestors, and expresses the yearning of disillusioned tillers of the soil for a lost life of freedom and relative ease.'²⁷ We should, therefore, see Zerzan's utopia of primitive freedom and authenticity not as something that once existed, still less as something we can return to as part of an anti-civilisational programme, but as a kind of negative imaginary, a point of exteriority and excess that allows us to escape from the mental confines of this world and to reflect on its limits. As Zerzan himself says: 'To "define" a disalienated world would be impossible and even undesirable, but I think we can and should try to reveal the unworld of today and how it got this way.'²⁸ We cannot return

²⁷ Zerzan, *Future Primitive*, p. 29.

²⁸ Zerzan, *Future Primitive*, p. 45.

to a primitive hunter-gatherer existence. As Rousseau said, we cannot return to the primeval bliss of the state of nature — once we had abandoned this Golden Age there was no going back. We can only go forward, working with what we have, resisting and destroying certain technologies, utilising and civilising others, but, more importantly, creating new spaces for autonomy and equality, new ways of life that resist and escape domestication.

However, where Zerzan's argument becomes problematic is in the essentialist notion that there is a rationally intelligible presence, a social objectivity that is beyond language and discourse. To speak in Lacanian terms, the pre-linguistic state of *jouissance* is precisely unattainable: it is always mediated by language that at the same time alienates and distorts it. It is an *imaginary* *jouissance*, an illusion created by the symbolic order itself, as the secret behind its veil. We live in a symbolic and linguistic universe, and to speculate about an original condition of authenticity and immediacy, or to imagine that an authentic presence is attainable behind the veils of the symbolic order or beyond the grasp of language, is futile. There is no getting outside language and the symbolic; nor can there be any return to the pre-Oedipal real. To speak in terms of alienation, as Zerzan does, is to image a pure presence or fullness beyond alienation, which is an impossibility. While Zerzan's attack on technology and domestication is no doubt important and valid, it is based on a highly problematic essentialism implicit in his notion of alienation.

To question this discourse of alienation is not a conservative gesture. It does not rob us of normative reasons for resisting domination, as Zerzan claims. It is to suggest that projects of resistance and emancipation do not need to be grounded in an immediate presence or positive fullness that exists beyond power and discourse. Rather, radical politics can be seen as being based on a moment of negativity: an emptiness or lack that is productive of new modes of political subjectivity and action.²⁹ Instead of hearkening back to a primordial authenticity that has been alienated and yet which can be recaptured — a state of harmony which would be the very eclipse of politics — I believe it is more fruitful to think in terms of a constitutive rift that is at the base of any identity, a rift that produces radical openings for political articulation and action.

The Ethics of Postanarchism

I have suggested that, despite their differences, both Bookchin and Zerzan work within an Enlightenment paradigm — similar to that of classical anarchism — which

²⁹ A similar point is made by John Holloway, who sees negativity as the basis for a refusal of capitalism. While he retains the concept of alienation as characteristic of capitalism, he sees it as an operation which denies, not the original essence of the subject, but rather the subject's potentiality — a humanity to come, not a humanity to be recovered: 'Not a lost humanity, nor an existing humanity, but a humanity to be created.' See *Change the World Without Taking Power: the Meaning of Revolution Today* (London: Pluto, 2002), p. 152.

presupposes a rational social essence or fullness: one that is either lost and needs to be recovered, or one that will be realised in the future through a process of dialectical development. My argument has been that this ontological vision forecloses the dimension of the political, determining its direction and eliminating the openness and contingency proper to it. This idea of openness and contingency, moreover, also refers to the domain of ethics. As I have shown, ethics is what opens politics to that which is beyond its own limits, disturbing the sovereignising tendency of political identities. In this sense, because postanarchism embodies a moment of an-anarchic disruption, it is a way of thinking about politics that is also deeply engaged with ethics. Postanarchism can be seen as a way of reflecting on the aporetic moment of tension between politics and ethics.

However, what do we mean by ethics here? Can we speak of a specifically postanarchist understanding of ethics, and how might this be different from other conceptions of ethics? The question of ethics and its relation to radical politics today becomes especially important in the face of what might superficially appear as two contradictory phenomena. On the one hand, there has been a delegitimising of universal moral categories, which can be found today in the plurality of moral positions, religious beliefs, ethical sensibilities and ways of life. On the other hand, we see the hysterical desire to reinvent moral absolutes: something that can be observed, for instance, in the construction of ethics — based on liberal notions of human rights — as a global ideology; or in the uncanny return of the worst kinds of religious dogmatism and conservatism. This is the paradoxical situation that confronts ethics under the conditions of postmodernity. While one can affirm, with Lyotard, the eclipse of metanarratives — including the Kantian universal moral imperative — the implications of this are often ambiguous. Rather than producing a liberation, it can at times lead to the imposition of a ferocious moral superego. Moral and religious fundamentalisms are in this sense symptomatic of the ‘postmodern condition’. The decline of the traditional authority of moral law and universal injunctions is supplemented today with ‘ethics committees’ and New Age spiritualism in a desperate attempt to reinvent the place of authority, to cover over the lack in the symbolic order. The liberation promised with the decline of traditional moral and symbolic authority now ends up in a new series of constraints and prohibitions. In the words of Lacan, who reversed the maxim of Dostoyevsky, ‘if God is dead, now *nothing* is permitted’.³⁰

How might an ethically engaged form of radical politics like anarchism respond to this situation? An adequate response surely cannot be a naive libertarianism which celebrates the breakdown of traditional moral authority as a moment of existential freedom. Things are not so simple: as Lacan pointed out, the project of the libertine is often complicated by the emergence of new prohibitions and laws, a new desire

³⁰ See Jacques Lacan, ‘A theoretical introduction to the functions of psychoanalysis in criminology’, *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society (JPCS)*, 1(2), 1996, pp. 13–25 at 15.

for authority.³¹ To transgress the law for its own sake only ends up reinventing it. As I will try to show, and contrary to what has been alleged, postanarchism does not amount to an amoral nihilism or relativism. Indeed, it builds upon the ethical possibilities of classical anarchism — particularly its ethics of solidarity and equality, the opposition to domination and a respect for the autonomy of others. Yet it does so without the ontological guarantees of universal moral and rational categories. While classical anarchism rejected the moral authority enshrined in religion, it proclaimed instead a moral authority based on nature, reason and science. For Kropotkin and Bakunin, nature contained moral and rational facts which could be discerned through scientific observation. When Kropotkin said that nature was the ‘first ethical teacher of man’, he was grounding an understanding of ethics in the certainties of biological evolution. While Godwin considered moral decision making to be the preserve of the autonomous individual who exercises the ‘right to private judgement’, he nevertheless saw this as being part of a process of universal moral and rational perfectibility.

However, if postanarchism questions this sort of moral foundationalism, can it still maintain a commitment to ethical action? Not according to Benjamin Franks, who argues that postanarchism leads to a radical subjectivism — a moral relativism where the individual, in a solipsistic fashion, determines his or her own moral coordinates — thus, making it unsuitable for developing ethical and political relations with others. This subjectivist position is attributed to Stirner, who, Franks argues, rejects the universal moral and rational discourses embodied in Enlightenment humanism and proposes in their place the supreme individualism and amoralism of the self-creating egoist:

However, the alternative [to consequentialist and deontological anarchisms] adopted by some egoist individualists and postanarchists, i.e. radical subjectivism, is inadequate on similar grounds. If subjectivism is right, then it restricts the possibility of meaningful ethical dialogue, recreates hierarchies between the liberated ego and the rest, and cannot adequately account for the creative ego, without recourse to the other social forms it rejects.³²

However, aside from the question of the extent to which I base my understanding of postanarchist ethics *entirely* on a Stirnerite egoism, I nevertheless regard Stirner as useful for a rethinking of ethics in terms of singularities. Moreover, as I have suggested, Stirner’s critique of morality should not be reduced to a simple selfish individualism: his understanding of the individual subject is more radical than that. I see Stirner as a kind of wrecking ball who demolishes the abstractions of humanism and rationalism erected in the place of God by Feuerbach. His point is to show that the moral and rational categories of modernity have an undiagnosed religiosity, a theological stain that continues to haunt their apparent secularity.³³ Morality is, therefore, an ideology,

³¹ See Jacques Lacan, ‘Kant with Sade’, *October*, 51, 1989.

³² See Benjamin Franks, ‘Postanarchism and Meta-ethics’, *Anarchist Studies*, 16(2), 2008 pp. 135–53 at 148.

³³ See Stirner, *The Ego and its Own*, pp. 45–6.

and it masks a certain relationship of domination. Thus, Stirner clears the ground for a reconsideration of ethics and politics beyond the categories of Enlightenment humanism and liberalism. Ethics and politics should be thought of at the level of singularities rather than universal abstractions; ethics must be open to a certain spontaneous and free self-determination by individuals, rather than imposed upon them from above through abstract moral codes and strictures. Moreover, the egoist who refuses to be subjected to these abstractions is not an immoralist, a position which simply reaffirms the binary established by morality. Rather, the egoist should be seen as an open dimension of subjectivity, a self-creating void that is always in the process of becoming, and in which all sovereign, fixed identities are destabilised. The subjectivity of the liberal bourgeois individual, with whom Stirner's ego is so often and so inaccurately associated, is itself undermined here.

However, does this egoism make ethical relations with others impossible, as Franks suggests? For Stirner, the egoistic removal of idealised abstractions like 'morality', 'humanity' and 'society' actually opens the possibility for new kinds of relations with other people, relations based on voluntary association rather than established bonds and obligations.

People will still come together, still fraternise, love one another and so on,

but the difference is this, that then the individual really *unites* with the individual, while formerly they were *bound together* by a tie; son and father are bound together before majority, after it they can come together independently; before it they *belonged* together as members of a family, after it they unite together as egoists; sonship and fatherhood remain, but son and father no longer pin themselves down to these.³⁴

While this social dimension of egoism is perhaps insufficiently elaborated and developed — Stirner makes certain references to the possibility of a 'union of egoists' — it is by no means ruled out in his account. Nor is there an implied hierarchy in Stirner's thinking, between the liberated ego and others, as Franks suggests. For Stirner, the possibilities of radical freedom offered by egoism and 'ownness' can be grasped by *anyone*; there is no Nietzschean sentimentality here for aristocracy.

As an alternative to both Stirnerite 'subjectivism' and moral universalism, Franks proposes a situated ethics: an understanding of ethics as situated within, and contingent upon, specific social practices, communities and organisations. Different situations demand different ethical relations and rules, rules which can nevertheless change over time, and are open to dialogue and critical negotiation.³⁵ I fully agree with this application of ethics, and I see it as a useful way of thinking about ethics in terms of autonomy and pluralism. However, what it lacks is an understanding of *ethical subjectivation* — in other words, the processes by which a subject becomes an ethical (and, indeed, political) subject. Therefore, I think the idea of a situated ethics needs to be supplemented with an account of the ethical subject. In an earlier chapter, I explored

³⁴ Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, p. 122.

³⁵ See Franks, 'Postanarchism and Meta-ethics', p. 147.

Levinas's anarchic account of ethics as a way of understanding ethical subjectivation: here the subject is held 'hostage' by the encounter with the Other, an encounter that unsettles and destabilises his or her sovereign identity. However, on the other side of this process are the micro-ethical and micro-political strategies that we engage in, and through which we constitute a relation to ethics. Here we must turn briefly to Foucault's 'ethics of the care of self'. While Foucault's focus on the ethical strategies that constitute the self might appear to be opposed to the Levinasian conception, in which the self is unsettled by the Other, my suggestion is that they are not as far apart as they seem: they both rely on a non-essentialist conception of the self and its relation to ethics. For Foucault, the ethical and ascetic strategies, such as *askesis*, that he explores in the later volumes of *The History of Sexuality*, are ways of thinking about the self, not in relation to an essential truth that the subject discovers within him or herself — a conception of the self which authorises regulatory and institutional practices into which the subject is inserted — but rather in relation to certain 'games of truth', rules of conduct and practices of care that the subject engages in. Put simply, these ethical strategies that Foucault discusses are ways that the subject *constructs*, rather than discovers, him- or herself. We find an important parallel here with Stirner's idea of the ego as a process of self-creation.

Moreover, although for Foucault, unlike Levinas, the care of the self is ontologically prior to the care of others, it nevertheless entails a certain ethical way of relating to others. In particular, it is a way of practising freedom in an ethical way: indeed, in this conception, freedom becomes an ethical problem. Freedom, for Foucault, cannot be a certain state beyond power that we finally reach through a moment of liberation. Rather, it must be an ongoing ethical practice, in which one's relationship with oneself and others is subject to a continual ethical interrogation:

this practice of liberation is not in itself sufficient to define the practices of freedom that will still be needed if this people, this society, and these individuals are able to define admissible and acceptable forms of existence or political society ... This ethical problem of the definition of practices of freedom, it seems to me, is much more important than the rather repetitive affirmation that sexuality or desire must be liberated.³⁶

Is Anarchism a Utopia?

What remains insufficiently theorised within classical anarchism — with its narratives of the liberation and realisation of the human subject through a rational unfolding of social and natural forces — is precisely this idea of a micro-political ethics as suggested by Foucault. In other words, we cannot assume that a revolutionary project of liberation from oppressive political and economic conditions will be enough: there will still be relations of power, requiring an ongoing ethical contestation, ongoing practices

³⁶ Foucault, 'The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom', pp. 282–3.

of freedom and the development of different modes of subjectivation. We must, therefore, consider again the question of utopia here. In previous chapters, I have suggested that postanarchism must retain a utopian dimension; indeed, this is vital to the anti-political horizon of radical politics. Yet this utopian dimension should be rethought. It should not be a concrete formulation of a liberated society; for instance, the idea of an ecological society with its municipal institutions, as proposed by Bookchin as the rational outcome of a process of dialectical unfolding. The utopian moment in anarchism should not seek to establish a scientific status for itself; it should not see itself in terms of a precise, scientific programme emerging inevitably from a rational process of social evolution. Rather, utopia gives itself over to the imaginary, providing a point of escape from the current order, a way of orienting and inciting (anti)political desire. Utopian thinking might be seen a way of puncturing the ontological status of the current order, introducing into it a moment of disruptive heterogeneity and singularity.

As I have argued, anarchism has always had a utopian dimension. However, one can also detect two different utopian moments in anarchism: one that might be termed ‘scientific utopianism’, in which a future anarchist society is founded on scientific and rational principles and will be the inevitable outcome of a revolution against the state; and another that might be termed ‘utopianism of the here and now’, in which the focus is less on what happens after the revolution, and more on a transformation of social relations within the present. Here the ‘spiritual’ anarchism of thinkers like Martin Buber and Gustav Landauer provides important ways of rethinking utopia. For instance, Landauer suggests that the state is more than simply an institution that can be overthrown in a revolution, and then replaced with an anarchist society. Rather, the state should be seen as a certain relation between people: a mode of behaviour and interaction. Therefore, it can be transcended only through a certain spiritual transformation of relationships: ‘we destroy it by contracting other relationships, by behaving differently’.³⁷ If there is no such transformation, the state will be simply reinvented in a different form during the revolution. The focus must be, then, on creating alternative, non-statist, non-authoritarian relationships between people. We find an emphasis here, then, on a libertarian micro-politics and micro-ethics: as with thinkers like Etienne de la Boetie, Foucault and Stirner, Landauer shows us that the problem of ‘voluntary servitude’ — the state or political domination as a way of thinking and as a mode of relating to others — must be overcome in our heads and hearts before it can be overcome as an external institution; or rather, that the two processes would be concurrent. This suggests a utopianism of the immediate, of the here and now — one that builds on the possibilities of community that already exist, and yet whose ways of life presuppose what is non-existent or not yet existent.³⁸

³⁷ Gustav Landauer, quoted in Martin Buber, *Paths in Utopia* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996), p. 47.

³⁸ We find a similar trope in Hakim Bey’s notion of the ‘Temporary Autonomous Zone’: heterotopic spaces which exist in the present, or which can be created in the present, in which alternative, libertarian

This ‘micro-political’ understanding provides us with an alternative, and I think more fruitful, way of thinking about utopia than that of scientific utopianism, in which the rational society of the future emerges as the inevitable product of the grand narrative of human liberation. However, this utopianism of the present should not be considered as an abandonment of politics, as if to imagine that the construction of autonomous communities and ways of life means that we can give up on the idea of politically confronting or contesting the existing order. The two must go together. Utopianism, while it is a means of escaping from the mental confines of the current order, should not be seen as a means of escaping from the responsibilities of political engagement. Indeed, we could say that a utopianism of the ‘here and now’ is also present in concrete forms of resistance to domination. For instance, to disrupt border control activities and to campaign for the rights of ‘illegal’ migrants is already a utopian act, because in such acts is presupposed the idea of a society of free circulation, without the tyranny of borders. So we must find ways of thinking about utopia that expresses both the desire for alternative forms of existence and the need to confront politically the dominations of the present.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have further elaborated a politics and ethics of postanarchism through an engagement in debates with contemporary anarchist thinkers. I have shown that there is a continuity at an ontological and epistemological level, between classical anarchism and contemporary anarchist thinkers such as Bookchin and Zerzan, despite their many important differences. Furthermore, I have shown that if anarchism is to remain relevant to radical 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 the guarantees of the dialectic. In this sense, we should think about (post)anarchism in terms of utopian moments of disruption and contingency, rather than the unfolding of a rational project of social fulfilment. Chapter 6 will explore the ways in which a politics of postanarchism can be applied to contemporary radical struggles and issues today.

and non-statist forms of existence can be imagined. See *T.A.Z: the Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy and Poetic Terrorism* (Autonomedia, 1991).

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