

Anarchism, Postmodernity, and Poststructuralism

Gabriel Kuhn

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Postmodernity and poststructuralism have been embraced in many intellectual circles since the late 1980s. Anarchist theory, though, has been a cautious suitor. In fact, a steadfast rebuttal of anything postmodern/poststructuralist has even united some of its most unrelenting foes (cf. Zerzan 1991; Albert n.d.). Since the beginning of the decade, however, there has been an increased interest in postmodernity's and poststructuralism's relevance for anarchist thought and praxis. It is the intent of this essay to investigate this interest, including its development and focus as well as its promises and flaws.

For the sake of clarity, I want to begin with a terminological distinction, since a curious confusion has plagued the discussions around postmodernity/poststructuralism for nearly two decades. The terms "postmodernity" and "poststructuralism" have different origins and have carried different discursive connotations until they began to be used increasingly as synonyms. The meanings of terms do of course depend on their use and circulation within a community of speakers and any attempt at defining their "true" meaning only makes us look foolish. At the same time, it seems natural in intellectual debates to use the terminological tools at hand in ways that allow for somewhat differentiated rather than oversimplified discussion. For example, I am convinced that the sweeping generalizations that sometimes characterize anarchist opposition to anything postmodern/poststructuralist would vanish once a simple distinction was made: that between an indeed irritating and politically non- or counter-productive jargon in the name of "postmodern thought" on the one hand; and radically inspired poststructuralist (and sometimes postmodern) critiques of the Platonic tradition and its repressive implications on the other.

In the context of this essay, "postmodernity" will refer to a *socio-cultural condition*, namely the one outlined by Jean-François Lyotard in *La condition postmoderne*, in which Lyotard (1979) applied an attribute mainly branded in architecture and the arts to society as a whole. An anarchist engagement with postmodernity would hence consist of an anarchist analysis of this condition – potentially helping anarchists to understand the socio-cultural dynamics of postmodern times, anarchists' positions within these, and the implied challenges as well as possibilities for the struggle against the State. "Poststructuralism," on the other hand, will refer to a *body of theory* – developed by Lyotard, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Jacques Derrida, and others – aimed at breaking the intellectual sway of structuralist thought in France following the events of May 1968.¹ An anarchist engagement with poststructuralism would hence consist of an anarchist evaluation of the usefulness of poststructuralist theory for anarchism's aims.

The distinction between a socio-cultural condition and a body of theory becomes somewhat blurred by the term *postmodernism*, which is most commonly understood as a movement of thought embracing the postmodern condition and attempting to strengthen pluralist theory –

¹ It is important to note that the term "poststructuralism" has never been more precise than sketched here. It has never been anything but a term of convenience that amalgamates a number of individual writers who, without doubt, have worked along common themes and with shared ambitions, but who never set out to form a "movement," let alone one called "poststructuralism."

thereby echoing a main feature of the poststructuralist endeavor. However, “postmodernism” remains a much wider term than “poststructuralism” and is used as a reference for everything from Jenny Holzer’s conceptual art to Jonathan Kramer’s music theory to Richard Rorty’s liberal politics. In fact, it might today include every expression of thought that does not navigate around pillars of God, human nature, or historical determinism. In such light, “poststructuralism” is indeed, in the words of Lewis Call (2002: 14), best understood as “a variety of postmodern thinking.”

Anarchism and Postmodernity

Postmodernity has left its mark on anarchism in various subtle ways. Concepts like those of a “small-a anarchism” – championed by David Graeber (2002), Starhawk (2004), and others – do, for example, distinctly resonate with times in which references to anything potentially “meta-narrative” seem to indicate an ungainly lack of intellectual refinement. Yet, surprisingly little has been published in terms of explicit anarchist reflections of and on postmodern culture. Lewis Call’s *Postmodern Anarchism* (2002) is by far the most extensive effort in this respect. After sketching a “postmodern matrix” and suggesting anarchism to be “a political philosophy which seems perfectly well suited to the postmodern world,” *Postmodern Anarchism* embarks on its journey to the “metastrand” of the indicated matrix, namely “the strand of science fiction literature known as cyberpunk” (2002: 11). In the course of this journey we encounter a generous evocation of Friedrich Nietzsche, a refreshing reading of Jean Baudrillard, and a widely acclaimed final chapter on the science fiction of William Gibson and Bruce Sterling whose writings exemplify for Call “a radical politics for the new millennium: a politics of postmodern anarchism” (2002: 24). Call’s work might not allow for the most spectacular theoretical leaps, but it certainly stands as an important marker for the possibilities of anarchist moments entrenched in the postmodern condition.

Unfortunately, few such additional markers can be found. Then again, the question arises whether we still need them when “postmodernity” itself becomes questionable as an apt description of our socio-cultural make-up. Hardt and Negri’s *Empire* (2000) is just one recent model that could be interpreted as an indication of the necessity to re-employ the long shunned “meta-narratives” in order to properly understand the workings of current social, cultural, political and economic dynamics. At the same time, the authors’ concept of a “multitude” as the most promising force of resistance – in its inherent plurality – might still be deemed a “postmodern” concept. If anything, this only goes to show that the complexity of the historical trajectory supersedes neat categories like “modernity” and “postmodernity,” and that (with particular regard to the relationship between anarchism and postmodernity) a re-evaluation of the analytical usefulness of the postmodern notion itself seems paramount.

Anarchism and Poststructuralism

Todd May’s book *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism* (1994), building on an earlier essay entitled “Is Post-Structuralist Political Theory Anarchist?” (1989), is usually referenced as the first broad attempt to fuse traditional anarchist thought with poststructuralist theory. Whether this claim holds true or not, the book must certainly count as a major contribution to the respective effort. At its core lies the conviction that “traditional anarchism,” while an important ethical and political guide, has theoretically been embedded in the “naturalist” and “essentialist” philosophy of the 19th century and its many epistemological shortcomings. Poststructuralism then enters the scene with a “political theory” that “replaces

traditional anarchism's *a priori*" (May 1994: 87) and that has the ability to infuse anarchism with new analytical and theoretical vigor.

In 2001, Australian Saul Newman published *From Bakunin to Lacan*, which recapped many of the contentions in May's work. Where the books differ is in the direction they take once they set out on what Newman elsewhere called the "salvage operation poststructuralism is to do on anarchism" (Newman 2003a). While May – via Lyotard, Foucault and Deleuze – ends up discussing analytic moral philosophy, Newman – by way of Stirner [who, according to Newman (2001:6) "provides an obvious but hitherto unexplored connection with poststructuralism"], Foucault, Deleuze/Guattari, and Derrida – finds his savior in Lacan who helps him "to theorize a non-essentialist outside to power" (2001: 160).

While the publication of May's book had gone more or less unnoticed, *From Bakunin to Lacan* was instantly acknowledged as an innovative contribution to anarchist discourse. The reasons for this discrepancy I see as threefold: (1) by 2001, poststructuralist theory had become such a strong and present player in many theoretical fields that anarchist intellectuals could hardly maintain their categorical rejection of it without appearing hopelessly anachronistic; (2) Newman's book was published within the post-Seattle "New Anarchism" euphoria which granted immediate and almost unconditional interest to anything hyped as "anarchist" and "new;" and (3) Newman had come up with a fancy and intriguing label for his position, namely that of "postanarchism" – a label he continues to promote and has most recently defined as indicating "a project of renewing the anarchist tradition through a critique of essentialist identities and the assertion instead of the contingency of politics" (Newman 2007: 4).

As with May's book, *From Bakunin to Lacan* is an important and inspiring exploration of the value of poststructuralist thought for anarchism. There remain certain theoretical problems, however. The most obvious lies in Newman's inconsistent use of the term "power," which oscillates between its "traditional" and its "Foucauldian" sense. Both May's and Newman's work also suffer from an oversimplification of "traditional/classical" anarchist thought and the concept of "essentialism." As a consequence, much of their critique of "traditional/classical" anarchism seems to focus on an effigy rather than a vibrant and diverse historical movement. Certain political problems stem from this: by focusing on a somewhat superficial critique of "traditional/classical" anarchism, the anarchist movement's political legacy often appears discredited (see also Cohn 2002; Cohn and Wilbur 2003; Zabalaza Anarchist Communist Federation 2003.) As far as Newman's work is concerned, the most pressing question is of course why any of its contents would make anarchism "post" – and, if so, "post" what exactly?

For one, anarchism has always been in flux and characterized by permanent alteration. So when Newman adds another chapter to this history, what makes this chapter so special that it validates a change to anarchism's name (other than the fact that "post" is already circulating as a hip, albeit overexploited, prefix)? Second, why would we want to go "beyond," "past," or "post" anarchism? Because we do not like certain things that Bakunin wrote? This does not sound very convincing to me. There are anarchist authors out there who hardly write anything that I like, but anarchism is not about the texts of certain authors, is it? Rather, anarchism is about a non-compromising struggle against institutions of authority (most evidently concentrated in the State – and nowadays maybe corporations) and about the creation and maintenance of social relations that do not reproduce such institutions. Poststructuralist theory, in my opinion, helps us with both: it strengthens our anarchism, and it provides us with no reason at all to change its name.

There is another difficulty with the postanarchist label, namely the suggestion that the junctions of anarchism and poststructuralism/postmodernity as laid out by Newman (and maybe – *ante litteram* – by May) are new, when, in fact, they are not. It is true, as stated above, that anarchist theory, for the most part, approached postmodern and poststructuralist thought with a lot of caution. Yet, this does not mean that exceptions did not exist. May and Newman might have made their blends of anarchism and poststructuralism explicit, but quite a few others had already brought the anarchist tradition and poststructuralist thought together without label or fuss. These folks followed an understanding which, interestingly enough, Newman himself conveys when he states that “poststructuralism is *in nuce* anarchist” (Newman 2003b).²

In other words: A number of anarchists in different parts of the world have long incorporated poststructuralism into their discussions and activities. Let us here name some examples from the German speaking realm where I know the history best. In Berlin a radical bookstore by the name of “Rhizom” was founded in the late 1970s by anarchists who deemed poststructuralist thinkers crucial in “formulating a critique of the State for the 20th and 21st century” (Bibliothek der Freien 2005). Swiss philosopher Urs Marti not only included a chapter entitled “Anarchist Sympathies” in his 1988 book *Michel Foucault*, but also drew numerous parallels between poststructuralist thought and Max Stirner, over a decade before Newman’s supposed resurrection of the infamous author of *The Ego and Its Own*.

Documented discussions of Foucault’s theory of power within circles of the German autonomous movement stem from 1991 at the latest (cf. VAL 1992), and at around the same time in Austria, I was part of two anarchist student groups that held regular self-conducted workshops on the political usefulness of poststructuralist theory. I could continue the examples, but I hope this amply illustrates my point. Even Jürgen Mümken, Germany’s most influential postanarchist writer and founder of *postanarchismus.net*, confirms that “the lack of a postanarchist debate ... does not necessarily mean a lack of the discussions that happen elsewhere under the postanarchist banner. The different theoretical considerations (poststructuralist anarchism, postmodern anarchism, etc.) that are nowadays summarized as ‘postanarchism’ are older than the term itself” (Mümken 2005: 11).³

Even within the history of the English speaking world certain valuable “pre-postanarchist” contributions to the anarchism/poststructuralism debate are largely overlooked. A prime example is Andrew Koch’s essay “Poststructuralism and the Epistemological Basis of Anarchism,” published to little acclaim in 1993 and today, despite the postanarchist hype, almost forgotten. Koch’s text contains a crucial insight into poststructuralist theory that both May’s and Newman’s work is lacking. While May and Newman reiterate the accusations of both the Marxist left and the liberal center that poststructuralism allows for no theory of resistance or is, in Newman’s

² Newman’s position here is not entirely clear, however. Within the pages of the same book he also speaks of the “fundamental differences” between anarchism and poststructuralism, and of “a bringing together” of the two (Newman 2001: 6f).

³ In fact, a curious misunderstanding surrounds the origins of the term. These are repeatedly traced back to a Hakim Bey essay from the 1980s, entitled “Post-Anarchism Anarchy” (later included in *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone*, 1991). However, what Bey was trying to suggest with the title was to leave all “-isms” behind and merely embrace “anarchy” instead. This is a concept propagated in recent years by groups such as CrimethInc. (2002) or the Green Anarchy Collective (2004) alike, and a concept that might be “postmodern” (even though our friends in Oregon might scowl at being associated with the term), but none that would in any way endorse a “postanarchism” – in fact, quite the contrary.

words, bereft of “an explicit *politico-ethico* content” (Newman 2003a), Koch makes it clear that “those who base their attacks on poststructuralism in the claim that the denial of a singular subjectivity makes the formulation of an ethics of resistance impossible misunderstand the focus of the poststructuralist argument” (Koch 1993: 348). Koch’s explanation of what he calls “a reversal of the burden of proof” is one of the most succinct and compelling formulations of a poststructuralist ethics: “It is not resistance to the state that needs to be justified but the positive actions of the state against individuals. Opposition to the state fills the only remaining normative space once the basis for state action has been denied” (ibid., 343). The neglect of Koch’s essay does no one a favor. Its study might go a long way for anyone interested in the anarchism of poststructuralist thought.⁴

The embrace of the postanarchist label itself does of course by no means prohibit great work. Richard Day’s recent book *Gramsci Is Dead: Anarchist Currents in the Newest Social Movements*, in which he sees himself “contributing to a small but growing body of work in postanarchism and autonomist marxism” (Day 2005: 10), has to count as remarkable proof of this, particularly in the way it presents and develops theory alongside concrete struggles. Indeed, Day’s analysis of what he calls the “newest social movements” bears a noticeable resemblance to analyses that suggest a “poststructuralist” character of the related anti-neoliberalist/anti-capitalist struggles (see, for example, Carter and Morland 2004, and Morland 2005). Nonetheless, it remains crucial to acknowledge the contributions made apart from all labels as well – not just as a matter of “fairness,” but to enrich our theoretical investigations. Concretely, this means paying attention to the work pursued in France by Daniel Colson or the Tiquun Collective, in Spain by Tomás Ibáñez, in Japan by the editors of the VOL journal – and I am sure in many other places of which I am unaware.

Outlook

At the risk of stating the obvious one more time, what seems most important are ideas and concepts, not names and labels. The former will remain when the latter are long gone. We will see what legacy will remain of postmodernity; given the *passepartout* levels that the term has reached, I am not holding my breath. The future relevance of poststructuralist theory for – or rather, within – the anarchist tradition will depend on the ways in which its ideas and concepts will inspire and strengthen our struggles. This, however, will much less depend on their “intrinsic” potentials than on our ability to relate them to our lives and their challenges. Here, then, are but a few aspects of poststructuralist thought (in no particular order) in whose concomitant potentials I strongly believe:⁵

⁴ Unfortunately, Koch has not expanded much on the relations between poststructuralism and anarchism in his later work. However, as recent publications show, he maintains both that “poststructuralism possesses an ethical principle that follows from its epistemological claims” (Koch 2007: ix) and that “leftist politics must have an anarchistic component” (2007: 106).

⁵ This indeed concerns biographical dimensions as well. It has always been one of the most disturbing effects of the “postmodern/poststructuralist” hodgepodge to allow the advertising of, say, “postmodern shopping malls” to cast a shadow over the activism of the poststructuralist thinkers, often leaving people with the belief that they had no politics. The opposite is true: every single one of the aforementioned theorists was politically engaged, and some – especially Deleuze and Guattari, but also Foucault – in very radical ways; ways much more radical, in fact, than those of many critics who depict them as supposed saboteurs of revolutionary political action. A critique of certain theories is one thing, but a blatant disregard for comrades’ contributions to the struggle is another.

1. A profound and fervent *critique of the Truth* which undermines all tendencies towards Platonic totalitarianism.
2. An uncompromising commitment to *plurality* and all that goes with it – rhizomes, cracks, shifts, fluidity, etc. – the anarchist value of which seems self-explanatory.
3. A far-reaching and all-encompassing *critique of representation* whose value to anarchists seems equally obvious.
4. A *critique of the subject* that liberates us from the need to conform to fixed identities and opens a never-ending playground to create and permanently re-create subjectivities in self-determined processes (the distinction between “subject” and “subjectivity” appears to be one of the most misunderstood aspects of poststructuralist thought).
5. Foucault’s *theory of power* which helps us understand the complexity of social stratification, strife, and struggle much better than previous concepts of power and – properly understood – opens up new, well-grounded, and effective means of resistance, rather than hindering them.
6. Foucault’s *specific intellectual*, who (contrary to the “universal intellectual”) pursues theoretical work as a contribution to solving concrete and immediate problems rather than as a means to establish oppressive grand theory.
7. The *dismantling of the boundaries separating theory and praxis* which makes the former an inherent part of the political struggle rather than its guide.⁶
8. Deleuze and Guattari’s *schizoanalysis*, which revolutionizes psychoanalysis and frees it – and hence desire – from all systematically imposed restrictions.
9. Derrida’s concepts of *differánce* and *deconstruction*, which allow us to read the entire socio-political field differently and to develop imaginative ways of intervention (regardless of how often the concepts are exploited as justifications of gibberish).
10. The focus on *the minor* as a key revolutionary element, which is both a continuation of the important anarchist legacy to stand up for all those traditionally banned from the “revolutionary subjects” of the orthodox left, and a reminder that the social field always requires the prodding of its fringe and marginal elements to avoid trite and dangerous self-complacency.
11. Deleuze and Guattari’s concepts of a *nomadic unity* of struggles (and, if one does not shy away from the martial overtones, a *nomadic war machine*), which sketch a diverse, fluid, and militant web of resistance that can only inspire anarchist politics (and should, in fact, have some of the poststructuralists’ strongest critics – e.g. the folks from and around *Green Anarchy* – beaming with delight).
12. The focus on *direct, non-mediated struggles*, which allows the support of those at the heart of a struggle to replace all pretentious attempts to guide or direct (let alone lead) them.
13. An *affirmative/positive character* of thought and action that prioritizes creativity over entanglement in petty critique and in-fighting.
14. Finally, a thorough *radicalism* of thought that addresses the foundations of our problems – indeed, I believe few anarchists would argue with this being an indispensable requirement for radical social change.

⁶ Unfortunately, this notion has all too often been abused as a means to whitewash alienated theory as “per se political.” If there is no immediate connection to concrete struggles, theory remains as political useless or harmful as alienated theory has always been. Overcoming the boundaries between theory and praxis is not about calling your theory political – it is about *making* it political.

This list is necessarily incomplete, simplified, and rough. Its only purpose is to inspire further reading, discussion and exploration – both to help us in our struggles and (which for me amounts to the same thing) to retain the radical (anarchist, if you will) legacy of the so-called poststructuralist thinkers.

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