

Notes on Post-Anarchism

Süreyya Evren

2008

There is a postanarchist reduction of classical anarchism seen in texts of some key writers on post-anarchism (like Todd May, Saul Newman, Lewis Call or more recently Richard Day).¹ Up until now, this feature of the postanarchist tendency has been criticized by various anarchists. But actually, ‘anarchists’ should admit that, ‘post-anarchists’ didn’t invent this! ‘Post-anarchists’ have been using the common anarchist history writing on classical anarchism which can be found anywhere in any reference book. The problem is, because of the reference to poststructuralism, they could be expected not to rely on that canonized history of anarchism without interrogating it, without questioning it at all.

When post-anarchists take the findings of a modernist, Eurocentric history writing of anarchism as a given truth and start working on this ground, it is likely to see them (post-anarchists) reproduce many problems already existing in this practice of history writing. (Jason Adams has given a basic critical questioning of this while he was talking on the “constructed history of anarchism”²). As someone working on post-anarchism as well, what Adams did in this early article was quite a good start — you have to turn your critical investigation to the given history of anarchism as well. Before comparing classical anarchism with poststructuralist philosophy, or before making a genealogy of affinity in the realm of ‘classical anarchism’ (that’s what Day does in “Gramsci is Dead”³) one must first endeavor to make a genealogy of the anarchist ‘canon’. These questions should be asked: how did the anarchist history writing developed? When and how were the main anarchist writers selected? Who were the fathers of the ‘fathers of anarchy’? Were there different tendencies in describing the main body of ‘classical anarchism’ and which tendency dominated the resulting history and how? How were the classical anarchists represented? Can we trace any hierarchy in these histories; were they modernist in their approach; can we trace any kind of discrimination?

Prejudice about a modernist anarchism is so strong that when these writers see an anti-modernist aspect of Bakunin for example, they either take it as an exception or something said inadvertently, or worse, as a contradiction! For example for Call, “Bakunin provides us, perhaps

¹This text is shorter and partially differently structured version of the text “Nietzsche, Post-Anarchism and the Senses”, first published at Siyahi magazine, no 7, Spring 2006, Istanbul.

²“Postanarchism in a Nutshell”, Jason Adams, info.interactivist.net, accessed on 15 / 11/ 2007.

³Especially see Chapter 4 (“Utopian Socialism Then...”) in Richard J. F. Day, Gramsci is Dead, Anarchist Currents in the Newest Social Movements, Pluto Press, London 2005.

quite inadvertently, with a point of departure for postmodern anarchism.” Here, Bakunin says science was marred by a dangerous and disturbing statism. So when Bakunin talks against science, he is talking inadvertently”, but when he talks for science, that should be what he actually believes holeheartedly. Why is that? Why then the ‘Bakunin effect’, the ‘Bakunin heritage’ is not the effect of a ‘science admirer’ but a creative man of deed and anarchist theory? How do we know if he said this inadvertently or not? Similarly, when Newman finds out that Kropotkin and Bakunin seemed anti-essentialist in some of their claims, he interprets these as ‘contradictions’! Whereas, the only contradiction is between the modernist image of anarchism and the real ‘anarchist effect’.

There is an assumption that both Marxism and anarchism are modernist political movements suffering the same modernist weaknesses, while anarchism has some potential to get out of this trap. Thus, to realize this we will have to eliminate modernist issues from classical anarchism (which is indeed the greater part of its political philosophy) and use remaining aspects that are in harmony with today’s post-modern/poststructuralist perspective.

Well, that was not really true, so let’s go back and start the discussion from there. Anarchism was not a modernist political movement, like Marxism, from the beginning it was an anti-modernist modern movement, and has been an important example of the modern radical movements. (‘Classical anarchism’ was not a Le Corbusierist movement but a Dadaist movement.) Modernist aspects in anarchism, on the contrary, are the minority, and ‘classical anarchism’ is mostly an anti-modernist current, there is little to eliminate in ‘classical anarchism’ and a lot to take if you are talking about a post-anarchism of today.

As it is with the history of anarchism, what I understand from post-anarchism has many folds, and one crucial fold is about anarchist history writing, a new post-anarchist thinking should bring a new anthology, a new history of anarchism. At least, a new sensibility towards existing anarchist histories.

Many accuse Newman or Day of ‘abusing’ anarchist tradition, as it is quite easy to recognize that their relation with the anarchist history is not sufficient on many levels – but on the other hand, what they are trying to do, especially Newman, is to bring anarchism into today’s political and theoretical agenda as something more powerful. This shouldn’t be underestimated. And I think they are trying the correct door for this – maybe they haven’t found the correct keys yet (maybe, it is time to make the keys collectively today).

* * *

When politicians see the anarchist embracing everything as political, struggling against every tiny possibility of domination, they regard this as an absence of something. Either a lack of passion for economics or a lack of passion for politics. What they don’t get is that everything is political with the anarchist and deserves the same passion. As the poet Ilhan Berk said in an interview “everything is political, even water flows politically.” Even water flows politically – thus, anarchist politics is a politics of life, of culture, anarchism is a raven knocking on the window to invite you. A libertarian party has begun! Anarchists are de facto pan-anarchists. Anarchist politics lies in the multiplicity of non-politics. The core is not fixed.

* * *

Can it be true that some anarchist principles became generally accepted principles in some Western cultural environments? While discussing the post-Seattle anti-globalization movements, I always tried to ask: where did these protestors who want to organize in an anarchistic way come from? Are they products of anarchistic propaganda? Not likely. My assumption is Western societies (and also many world cities in different parts of the world) are today able to produce ‘anarchistic subjects’, subjects who would only be interested in politics if it is done according to ‘anarchist principles’ or a ‘logic of affinity’. This is because when these people wanted to get politicized there was no other way for them outside the anarchistic way – they wouldn’t accept being part of a Marxist party machine, wouldn’t accept orders, wouldn’t accept being represented by some revolutionary, and yet they still want to engage in something political – what is left for a person like that? Only anarchism or an unlabeled mode of organization which has anarchistic principles and which uses the logic of affinity. Another option is to get in touch with a Marxist faction which has openly declared that they will follow anarchistic principles (Holloway, Negri, etc.) that won’t frustrate ‘anarchistic subjects’ in the West. There may be something very fundamental for post-anarchism here. The question of “how did the postanarchist subjects appear” also goes back to May 68.

* * *

If we go back to the pre-1994 period of EZLN, we can remember that Marcos didn’t go to Chiapas for a post-revolution, he went there to organize a modernist-type revolution. Before 1994, EZLN happened through a process of mutuality in Chiapas. Not ended with an utopian heaven, but had a heavenly effect for the Left world. If we can lay aside political correctness for a moment, we can dare say that, although the Mexican government also had a paramilitary branch which killed and wounded many, there were very few countries that would let a Marcos be as he liked with his EZLN in 1994 and afterwards. For example it wouldn’t be possible in the USA, Peru, Russia, China, Turkey or UK. It wouldn’t happen in a ‘real democracy’ (which can’t endure strong oppositions as we recently witnessed when Western governments showed their brutal side to anti-globalisation protestors early in the 2000s in Gothenburg and in Italy) or in a ‘totalitarian country.’ Mexico was an exceptional zone. And from the beginning, in order not to let this exceptional state become isolated and eventual fade away, EZLN/Marcos described it not as a form and not as an ideology, but as an understanding, as an approach to politics. Isn’t this the core principle of ‘new anarchism’ today as well?

* * *

If we are bound to compare anyway, instead of comparing only Deleuze with Kropotkin, why don’t we compare Emma Goldman with Helene Cixous and Irigaray. Voltairine de Cleyre with Butler and Flores Magon with Homi Bhabha. Why Russian anarchists in the anarchist canon are always Russian anarchists outside of Russia? Why is nobody taking serious anarchists in the Russian revolution – the worse decision of a Russian anarchist was not to leave Russia then, the best and only way to be known as a Russian anarchist was to leave Russia?! Let’s go back to Avrich’s ‘The Anarchists in the Russian Revolution’ and the inspiring “Pan-Anarchist Manifesto”.

* * *

Call and Newman suggest that anarchism starts from its anti-state position. So for them, anarchism is first of all a political stance against all states, an anti-statism and everything comes after or from this. That's obviously not what many anarchists will understand by anarchism. We think that anarchism is pananarchism⁴ in nature, a rejection of all authority, hierarchy and representation. Being anti-state is a form of anti-hierarchy, anti-authoritarianism at the nation scale. On the other hand, anarchism carries politics outside the area of a fight for state power. It is always grassroots in this sense as well. You do not first reject the state. You first reject authority, hierarchy, pyramidal societies, representation and domination. Then, as such a person, when the issue comes to states, you of course also reject the state and think of something different like federations, etc.

And the reason that all these start from post-anarchism lies in the role of poststructuralist theories of philosophy and history in this intersectional web of resistance movements. Post-anarchism does not present a new anarchism to us. But it can create a resistance power against modernist categorizations of anarchist history and concepts. And moreover, it can be an embracement of poststructuralist philosophical contributions to the anarchist movement. Post-anarchism for me is just anarchism but stronger, joining forces with its relatives, network neighbours today and in history, in culture and in daily life. So this is an experiment in understanding anarchism (in its stronger post-anarchist form) as a world wide anti-modernist modern political movement which has existing or potential connections with other anti-modernist modern movements in different disciplines today and in history.

* * *

At one given time there are more than one centre of power, and if you want to resist them, you have to shape your resistance accordingly — which means, against many places of power, you need many places of resistance. In both approaches (understanding one central place of power or accepting that there are many centres) we anticipate that the resistance would mirror the structure of the supposed power. Is this a must? Usually yes, or usually the answer is yes. But we shouldn't forget that not always.

Here I should admit that this was a must for me for a long time and it was one of the reasons that led me to post-anarchism. For example in my first written account of “postmodernism and anarchism” in 1994, I basically said that if a libertarian left would emerge in Turkey it could only do that in the vast fields of postmodernism. Because representation has been generally collapsed after postmodernism. We are all in it with no way to escape, but we can choose what kind of a postmodernism we would apply, and this could be a anarcho-postmodernism. I was giving talks on “postmodernism and the left” and the main argument I was so confident about, was the same “don't you see the places of power are postmodernistic, so to neutralize them we have to mirror them from the other angle, which is anarcho-postmodernism”. Today I wouldn't find this so convincing, as I will try to show here, there is no ‘must’ in mirroring the actual power structures to overcome them. Understanding the structure of the places of power do not necessarily determine the structure of resistance against.

For example, you can accept that power is reducible, works with one decisive centre at one time, understand it as a pyramidal structure, but you can still fight this structure through anarchistic principles, using ‘tactical political philosophy’, or the logic of affinity. For example guer-

⁴For the pananarchist manifesto see Paul Avrich's *Anarchism in the Russian Revolution*, Thames and Hudson, 1973.

rilla struggles in many occasions deploy this, even Nechaev's cell structure deploys a network structured movement, and it was not mirroring the structure it was fighting with. Even some global justice movement elements are in this category – take a demonstration against a summit. Making a demonstration against a G8 meeting means that you understand G8 leadership as the core of world power relations at the time. So you find it crucial and decisive for all the world's power relations and existing domination structures. But you organise anarchistically, use tactics of micro politics, and attack a routine gathering of world's power-core. You are somehow like anarchistic assassins – where you kill a king but not as a soldier of an army – like an oppositional revolutionary structure, but as an individual, obviously without mirroring the dominating structure.

These movements are so close to a kind of post-anarchist, Deleuzeian way of rhizomatic organising, etc., and are against every little domination that can be detected – be it an inside movement or outside – yet, when it comes to putting a stance against world politics, you do not have a floating Empire without a centre in these people's agenda; instead you have a clear set of countries, organisations and elites, leaders there, obvious cores of world power. It shows that when it comes to political action, activists do not insist that no power relation is reducible – even activists who explore various tactical, anarchistic principles of organisation and politics.

* * *

Nowadays, it is so common to see someone condemning animosity or anger. Whatever you do, you are expected to do it in a normal, civilised mood. Don't lose your temper, don't hate the evil. Don't nail the Satan. Calmly, vote against the Satan. Or better, despise voting, and demonstrate against Satan, very rationally. Know your reasons well, keep your arguments strong, measure your methods well, and do not make anything you haven't planned before. Don't bring delirium to the stage. Don't create a scene when it is not collectively decided to create one.

But then, how will we deal with the history of worldwide resistances, revolutions, revolts, insurrections? A strong element of anger has always been central in all of those. Passionate subjects, obsessive moments, sacrifice, regret, grief, all kinds of emotions – not only affirmative ones.

Clutching on to an affirmative perspective does not require turning into affirmative robots. Politics is full of people in anger. Transforming the world is an idea full of all kinds of emotions. Angry women, angry men, angry queers, angry children, angry elders, all are welcome in a resistance. Resistance, insurrection, a new world, a better world, transforming the world, are not really projects of social engineers, calm planners, but they are ideas coming from life moments where pain was dominant.

Maybe we need an affirmation of anger. An affirmation of anger, insurgence, resistance, denial. 'Enough is enough' is an affirmation of resistance. In whatever form. Anger is not despair. It is not depression. It is not envy or jealousy. Affirmation became an anti-political tool today. Neo-liberal discourse prefers affirmative language to the language of negation. Advertisements are affirmative. They may be based on jealousy but they are not based on anger.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Süreyyya Evren
Notes on Post-Anarchism
2008

In *Talk on Anarchism* (2008) Group for Logistical Support. Belgrade.

theanarchistlibrary.org