

Postanarchism and Radical Politics Today

By Saul Newman

In a recent series of exchanges between Slavoj Žižek and Simon Critchley, the spectre of anarchism has once again emerged. In querying Critchley's proposal in his recent book, *Infinitely Demanding*¹, for a radical politics that works outside the state—that take its distance from it—Žižek says:

The ambiguity of Critchley's position resides in a strange non sequitur: if the state is here to stay, if it is impossible to abolish it (or capitalism), why retreat from it? Why not act with(in) the state?... Why limit oneself to a politics which, as Critchley puts it, 'calls the state into question and calls the established order to account, not in order to do away with the state, desirable though that might be in some utopian sense, but in order to better it or to attenuate its malicious effects'? These words simply demonstrate that today's liberal-democratic state and the dream of an 'infinitely demanding' anarchic politics exist in a relationship of mutual parasitism: anarchic agents do the ethical thinking, and the state does the work of running and regulating society.²

Instead of working outside the state, Žižek claims that a more effective strategy—such as that pursued by the likes of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela—is to grasp state power and use its machinery ruthlessly to achieve one's political objectives. In other words, if the state cannot be done away with, then why not use it for revolutionary ends? One hears echoes of the old Marx-Bakunin debate that split the First International in the 1870s: the controversy of what to do about the state—whether to resist and abolish it, as the anarchists believed, or to utilise it, as Marxists and, later, Marxist-Leninists believed—has returned to the forefront of radical political theory today. The question is why, at this political juncture, has this dilemma become important, indeed vital, again? And why, after so many historical defeats and

¹ Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*, London: Verso, 2007.

² Slavoj Žižek, 'Resistance is Surrender', *London Review of Books*, 15 November 2007.

reversals, has the figure of anarchism returned to haunt the radical political debates of the present?

This is not to suggest that Critchley is an anarchist (or even that Žižek is a Marxist, for that matter) in any simplistic sense, although both thinkers claim inspiration from, and a degree of affinity with, these respective traditions of revolutionary thought. It is to suggest, however, that the conflict between these thinkers seems to directly invoke the conflict between libertarian and more authoritarian (or rather statist) modes of revolutionary thought. Moreover, the re-emergence of this controversy signifies the profound ambivalence of radical politics today: after the decline of the Marxist-Leninist project (or at least of a certain form of it) and a recognition of the limits of identity politics, radical politics is uncertain about which way to turn. My contention is that anarchism can provide some answers here—and, moreover, that the present moment provides an opportunity for a certain revitalisation of anarchist theory and politics.

There is an urgent need today for a new conceptualisation of radical politics, for the invention of a new kind of radical political horizon—especially as the existing political terrain is rapidly becoming consumed with various reactionary forces such as religious fundamentalism, neoconservatism/neoliberalism and ethnic communitarianism. But what kind of politics can be imagined here in response to these challenges, defined by what goals and by what forms of subjectivity? The category of the ‘worker’, defined in the strict Marxian economic sense, and politically constituted through the revolutionary vanguard whose goal was the dictatorship of the proletariat, no longer seems viable. The collapse of the state socialist systems, the numerical decline of the industrial working class (in the West at least) and the emergence, over the past four or so decades, of social movements and struggles around demands that are no longer strictly economic (although they have often have economic implications), have all led to a crisis in the Marxist and Marxist-Leninist imaginary. This does not mean, of course, that economic issues are no longer central to radical politics, that the desire for economic and social equality no longer conditions radical political struggles and movements. On the contrary, as we have seen in recent years with the anti-globalisation movement, capitalism is again on the radical political agenda. However, the relationship between the political and the

economic is now conceived in a different way: ‘global capitalism’ now operates as the signifier through which diverse issues—autonomy, working conditions, indigenous identity, human rights, the environment, etc—are given a certain meaning.³

The point is, though, that the Marxist and Marxist-Leninist revolutionary model—in which economic determinism met with a highly elitist political voluntarism—has been largely historically discredited. This sort of authoritarian revolutionary vanguard politics has led not to the withering away of state power, but rather to its perpetuation. Žižek’s attempt to resurrect this form of politics does not resolve this problem, and leads to a kind of fetishization of revolutionary violence and terror.⁴ Indeed, one could say that there is a growing wariness about authoritarian and statist politics in all forms, particularly as state power today takes an increasingly and overtly repressive form. The expansion of the modern neoliberal state under its present guise of ‘securitisation’ represents a crisis of legitimacy for liberal democracy:⁵ even the formal ideological and institutional trappings of liberal checks and balances and democratic accountability have started to fall away to reveal a form of sovereignty which is articulated more and more through the state of exception. This is why radical political movements are increasingly suspicious of state power and often resistant to formal channels of political representation—the state appears to activists as a hostile and unassailable force through which there can be no serious hope of emancipation.

Indeed, radical political activism today seems to be working in the opposite direction. Instead of working through the state, it seeks to work outside it, to form movements and political relationships at the level of civil society rather than at the institutional level. This is not to deny, of course, that many more reformist-minded activists lobby and negotiate with the governments and state institutions on certain issues; but amongst the more radical anti-capitalist activists, the emphasis is on constructing autonomous political spaces which are outside the state, even while making demands

³ See Saul Newman, *Unstable Universalities: Poststructuralism and Radical Politics*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007.

⁴ See Žižek in Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, London: Verso, 2000, p. 326. See also his more recent writings on Lenin (*Revolution at the Gates*, ed., Žižek, London: Verso, 2004) and Mao Tse-Tung (*On Practice and Contradiction*, ed., Žižek, London: Verso, 2007).

⁵ See Wendy Brown’s excellent essay on neoliberalism: ‘Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy’, *Theory & Event*, 7: 1, 2003.

upon it.⁶ Moreover, social movements today eschew the model of the revolutionary vanguard party with its authoritarian, hierarchical and centralised command structures; rather, the emphasis is on horizontal and ‘networked’ modes of organisation, in which alliances and affinities are formed between different groups and identities without any sort of formalised leadership. Decision-making is usually decentralised and radically democratic.⁷

It is perhaps because contemporary modes of radical politics are often ‘anarchist’ in organisational form, that there has been a renewed interest in anarchist theory. Anarchism has always been on the margins of political theory, even of radical political theory, often being historically overshadowed by Marxism and other forms of socialism.⁸ This is perhaps because it is a kind of ‘limit condition’ for political theory, which, since Hobbes, has traditionally been founded on the problem of sovereignty and the fear of its absence. In Hobbes’ state of nature, the conditions of perfect equality and perfect liberty—the defining principles of anarchism—led inevitably to the ‘war of everyman against everyman’, thus justifying the sovereign state.⁹ For anarchists, however, the social contract upon which this sovereignty was supposedly based was an infamous sleight of hand in which man’s natural freedom was sacrificed to political authority.¹⁰ Rather than suppressing or restricting perfect liberty and equality—which most forms of political theory do, including liberalism— anarchism seeks to combine them to the greatest possible extent. Indeed, one cannot do without the other. Étienne Balibar has formulated the notion of ‘equal-liberty’ (*egaliberté*) to express this idea of the inextricability and indeed, irreducibility, of equality and liberty—the idea that one cannot be realised without the other:

⁶ See once again Simon Critchley’s description of ‘anarchic metapolitics’ in *Infinitely Demanding*. This idea of developing alternative spaces outside the state has been developed by a number of thinkers, especially Hakim Bey with his notion of the ‘temporary autonomous zone’. See Bey, *T.A.Z: The Temporary Autonomous Zone*, New York: Autonomedia, 2003.

⁷ The ‘anarchist’ forms of organisation and decision-making procedures which characterise many activist groups today are discussed in David Graber’s article, ‘The New Anarchists’, *New Left Review* 13 (Jan/Feb 2002).

⁸ This was not always the case, though: for instance, during the Spanish Civil war, anarchist groups were in many parts of the Spain the dominant political force. See Gaston Leval, *Collectives in the Spanish Revolution*, trans., V. Richards, Freedom Press, 1975.

⁹ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed., C.B. Macpherson, London: Penguin [1651] 1968, Ch. 13.

¹⁰ See Mikhail Bakunin, *Political Philosophy: Scientific Anarchism*, ed., G.P. Maximoff, London: Free Press of Glencoe, 1953, p. 165.

It states the fact that it is *impossible* to maintain to a logical conclusion, without absurdity, the idea of perfect civil liberty based on discrimination, privilege and inequalities of condition (and, *a fortiori*, to institute such liberty), just as it is impossible to conceive and institute equality between human beings based on despotism (even ‘enlightened’ despotism) or on a monopoly of power. Equal liberty is, therefore, *unconditional*.¹¹ [italics are Balibar’s]

However, it was the anarchists who took this formulation to its logical conclusion: if liberty and equality are to mean anything, then surely state power itself—whatever form it took—must be questioned; surely sovereignty was the ultimate blight upon equality and liberty. This is why, for Bakunin, equality of political rights instantiated through the ‘democratic’ state was a logical contradiction:

[E]quality of *political rights*, or a *democratic State*, constitute in themselves the most glaring contradiction in terms. The State, or political right, denotes force, authority, predominance; it presupposes inequality in fact. Where all rule, there are no more ruled, and there is no State. Where all equally enjoy the same human rights, there all political right loses its reason for being. Political right connotes privilege, and where all are privileged, there privilege vanishes, and along with it goes political right. Therefore the terms ‘*democratic State*’ and ‘*equality of political rights*’ denote no less than the destruction of the State and the abolition of all political right.¹² [italics are Bakunin’s]

In other words, there cannot be equality—not even basic political equality—while there is a sovereign state. The equality of political rights entailed by democracy is ultimately incompatible with *political right*—the principle of sovereignty which grants authority over these rights to the state. At its most basic level, political equality can only exist in tension with a right that stands above society and determines the conditions under which this political equality can be exercised. Political equality, if taken seriously and understood radically, can only mean the abolition of state sovereignty. The equality of wills and rights implied by democracy means that it is ultimately irreconcilable with any state, or with the structure and principle of state

¹¹ Étienne Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene*, London: Verso, 2002, p. 3.

¹² Bakunin, *Political Philosophy*, pp. 222-3.

sovereignty itself. The demand for emancipation, central to radical politics, has always been based on the inseparability of liberty and equality. Anarchists were unique in their contention that this cannot be achieved—*indeed cannot even be conceptualised*—within the framework of the state.

Critique of Marxism

Anarchism's main contribution to a politics and theory of emancipation lies, as I see it, in its libertarian critique of Marxism. I have explored this elsewhere¹³, and it has been extensively covered by other authors¹⁴; but, fundamentally, this critique centres around a number of problems and blindspots in Marxist theory. Firstly, there is the problem of the state and political power. Because, for Marxism—notwithstanding Marx's own ambivalence on this question¹⁵—political power is derived from and determined by economic classes and the prerogatives of the economy, the state is seen largely as a tool which can be used to revolutionise society if it is in the hands of the proletariat. This idea is expressed in Lenin's *State and Revolution*—a strange text which, in some places, seems to veer close to anarchism in its condemnation of the state and its celebration of the radical democracy of the Paris Commune; and at the same time reaffirms the idea of the seizure of state power and the socialist transformation of society under the dictatorship of the proletariat.¹⁶ This ambiguity with regards to the state can be found in Marx's own thought, which shares with anarchism the goal of libertarian communism—an egalitarian society based on free association, without a state—and at the same time departs from anarchism in its belief that the state can and must be used in the 'transitional' period for revolutionary purposes. For anarchists, this position was fundamentally dangerous because it ignored the autonomy of state power—the way that the state was oppressive, not only in the form it takes, but in its very structures; and that it has its own prerogatives, its

¹³ See Saul Newman, *From Bakunin to Lacan: anti-authoritarianism and the dislocation of power*, Lanham M.D.: 2007 [2001].

¹⁴ See, for instance, Paul Thomas, *Karl Marx and the Anarchists*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980.

¹⁵ I am referring to Marx's theory of the Bonapartism, in which the state achieves a degree of autonomy from bourgeois class interests. See 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte' in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 7, 1976. See also Saul Newman, 'Anarchism, Marxism and the Bonapartist State', *Anarchist Studies*, 12(1): 2004, 36-59.

¹⁶ This work is really a kind of dialogue with anarchism—Lenin's attempt to distance himself from anarchism, which he seems at times to be in close proximity to. V.I Lenin, *The State and Revolution*, New York: International Publishers, 1932 and 1943.

own logic of domination, which intersect with capitalism and bourgeois economic interests but are not reducible to them. For anarchists, then, the state would always be oppressive, no matter which class was in control of it—indeed, the workers’ state was simply another form of state power. As Alan Carter says:

Marxists, therefore, have failed to realise that the state *always* acts to protect its own interests. This is why they have failed to see that a vanguard which seized control of the state could not be trusted to ensure that the state would “wither away.” What the state might do, instead, is back different relations of production to those which might serve the present dominant economic class if it believed that such new economic relations could be used to extract from the workers an even greater surplus—a surplus which would then be available to the state.¹⁷

For anarchists, then, the state was not only the major source of oppression in society, but the major obstacle to human emancipation—which was why the state could not be used as a tool of revolution; rather, it had to be dismantled as the first revolutionary act. We might term this theoretical insight—in which the state is conceived as a largely autonomous dimension of power—the ‘autonomy of the political’. However, here I understand this somewhat differently from someone like Carl Schmitt, for whom the term refers to a specifically political relation constituted through the friend/enemy antagonism.¹⁸ For Schmitt, this entails an often violent struggle over power and identity, in which the sovereignty of the state is affirmed. For anarchists, it has precisely the opposite implication—a struggle of society *against* organised political, as well as economic, power; a general struggle of humanity against both capitalism and the state.

The second distinction between Marxism and anarchism follows on from the first: while for Marxists, and particularly Marxist-Leninists, the revolutionary struggle is usually led by a vanguard party which, as Marx would say, has over the mass of

¹⁷ Alan Carter, ‘Outline of an Anarchist Theory of History,’ in *For Anarchism: History, Theory and Practice*, ed. David Goodway, London: Routledge, 1989, 176-197.

¹⁸ See Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans., G. Schwab, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

proletariat the advantage of correctly understanding the “line of march”¹⁹, for anarchists, the vanguard party was an authoritarian and elitist model of political organisation whose aim was the seizure and perpetuation of state power. In other words, according to anarchists, the revolutionary vanguard party—with its organised and hierarchical command structures and bureaucratic apparatuses—was already a microcosm of the state, a future state in waiting.²⁰ For anarchists, the revolution must be libertarian in form as well as ends—indeed, the former would be the condition for the latter; and so rather than a vanguard party seizing power, a revolution would involve the masses acting and organising themselves spontaneously and without leadership. This does not mean that there would be no political organisation or coordinated action; rather that this would involve decentralised and democratic decision making structures.

The third major opposition between anarchism and Marxism concerns revolutionary subjectivity. For Marxists, the proletariat—often defined narrowly as the upper echelons of the industrial working class—is the only revolutionary subject because, in its specific relationship to capitalism, it is the class which embodies the universality and the emancipatory destiny of the whole of society. Anarchists had a broader conception of revolutionary subjectivity, in which could be included proletarians, peasants, lumpenproletariat, intellectuals *déclassé*—indeed, anyone who declared him or herself a revolutionary. Bakunin spoke of a “great rabble”, a non-class which carried revolutionary and socialist aspirations in its heart.²¹ Indeed, Bakunin preferred the term “mass” to class, class implying hierarchy and exclusiveness.²²

Of course, these disagreements do not cover all the points of difference between anarchism and Marxism—other questions, such as the role of factory discipline or Taylorism, as well as the value of industrial technology, were also important areas of dispute; and have indeed become even more prominent today with greater awareness

¹⁹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, ‘Manifesto of the Communist Party’, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed., R.C. Tucker, New York: W.W Norton & Co, 1978, p. 484.

²⁰ See Murray Bookchin, ‘Listen Marxist!’ in *Post-Scarcity Anarchism*, Berkeley: The Ramparts Press, 1971.

²¹ Mikhail Bakunin, *Marxism, Freedom and the State*, trans., K.J Kenafick, London: Freedom Press, 1950, p. 47

²² Bakunin, *Marxism, Freedom and the State*, p. 48.

about industrial society's impact on the natural environment.²³ However, the three major themes I have discussed—the autonomy, and therefore the dangers, of state power; the question of political organisation and the revolutionary party; and the question of political subjectivity—constitute the main areas of difference between a Marxist and anarchist approach to radical politics.

Contemporary debates

The themes I have discussed are often reflected in debates in radical political theory today, particularly amongst key continental thinkers—such as Badiou, Rancière, Laclau, and Hardt and Negri. Amongst these contemporary theorists there is the recognition of the need to develop new approaches to radical politics in the face of the global hegemony of neoliberal capitalism and the increasing authoritarianism and militarism of 'democratic' states. Indeed, as I shall show, many of these thinkers seem to come quite close to anarchism in their approaches to radical politics, or draw upon anarchist themes—while at the same time remaining silent about the anarchist tradition. It is only Critchley who explicitly invokes anarchism in his notion of 'anarchic meta-politics'—although he has virtually nothing to say about the tradition of anarchist political thought itself, relying instead on a more philosophical and ethical reading of anarchy derived from Levinas.²⁴ There is a general and somewhat perplexing silence about anarchism—and yet, I would suggest that anarchism is the 'missing link' in a certain trajectory of radical political thought, one that is becoming increasingly relevant today. Here I will attempt to show the ways in which anarchism can inform some of these key debates in contemporary radical politics.

For instance, if we examine a thinker like Alain Badiou, we see a number of 'anarchist' themes emerging.²⁵ Despite his criticisms of anarchism, Badiou argues for a militant and emancipatory form of politics which does not rely on formal political

²³ More recently there have been important attempts to develop an anarchist approach to the environment, and to understand the relationship between social domination and environmental devastation. See Murray Bookchin's concept of 'social ecology' in *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy*, AK Press, 2005; as well as John Zerzan's writings, for example, *Future Primitive*, Autonomedia, 1994.

²⁴ Here Critchley cites Levinas' pre-political or a-political notion of anarchy as the absence of an *archè* or organising principle. See *Infinitely Demanding*, p. 122.

²⁵ As Ben Noys argues, Badiou is a thinker who, despite being highly critical of anarchism, has much in common with it. See 'Through a Glass Darkly: Alain Badiou's critique of anarchism', *Anarchist Studies*, 2008 (unpublished manuscript currently in draft form).

parties and which works outside the state. For Badiou, the state has always been the rock upon which revolutionary movements in the past have foundered:

More precisely, we must ask the question that, without a doubt, constitutes the great enigma of the century: why does the subsumption of politics, either through the form of the immediate bond (the masses), or the mediate bond (the party) ultimately give rise to bureaucratic submission and the cult of the State?²⁶

This was precisely the same problem that was posed by the anarchists well over a century before—the tendency and danger of revolutionary movements (including Marxism) to reproduce, through the mechanism of the political party, the state power they claimed to be opposing. This is why Badiou proposes a post-party form of politics that, in his words, puts the state “at a distance”.²⁷ Here he points to historical events—such as the Paris Commune of 1871, May ’68 in Paris, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, and contemporary movements such as those which campaign for the rights of illegal immigrant workers²⁸—in which egalitarian, autonomous and radically democratic forms of politics were achieved which avoided the party-state form. Here we see a critique of political representation and statism which has strong resonances with anarchism.

And yet there is a strange ambiguity here. While, for instance, Badiou celebrates some of the more libertarian aspects of the Cultural Revolution, such as the Shanghai Commune of 1966-7 which drew inspiration from the Paris Commune and which experimented with forms of radical democracy—at the same time he deliberately distances himself from anarchism:

We know today that all emancipatory politics must put an end to the model of the party, or of multiple parties, in order to affirm a politics ‘without party’, and yet at the same time without lapsing into the figure of anarchism, which has never been anything else than the vain critique, or double, or the shadow, of

²⁶ Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, trans., Jason Barker. London: Verso, 2005, p. 70.

²⁷ Badiou, *Metapolitics*, p. 145.

²⁸ See, for example, L’Organisation Politique, an organisation which Badiou is involved with, and which campaigns for the rights of undocumented immigrant workers—*sans papiers*.

communist parties, just as the black flag is only the double or the shadow of the red flag.²⁹

One could certainly dispute Badiou's dismissal of anarchism that it is simply the 'double' of the communist parties. Anarchists departed from the Marxist and Marxist-Leninist movements in significant ways, developing their own analysis of social and political relations, and their own revolutionary strategies. Yet, what is more problematic—as well as paradoxical—about Badiou, is his highly idealised and abstract conception of politics, one that sees the political 'event' as such a rarefied experience that it almost never happens. The impression one gets from Badiou is that all genuine radical politics ended with the Cultural Revolution. Major political events, such as the 'Battle of Seattle' in 1999 and the emergence of the anti-globalisation movement, are consigned to irrelevance in Badiou's eyes.³⁰ The problem with Badiou is his haughty disregard for concrete, everyday forms of emancipatory politics: genuine egalitarian experiments in resistance, autonomy and radical democracy are going on all the time, in indigenous rights movements, in food cooperatives, in squatters' collectives, in independent media centres and social centres, in innovative forms of direct action, in courageous acts of civil disobedience, in mass demonstrations and so on³¹, all of which Badiou seems either oblivious to or grandly contemptuous of. As Critchley has observed, Badiou gestures towards a 'great politics' and an ethics of heroism,³² one that risks, as I would argue, a nostalgia for the struggles of the past. There is a kind of philosophical absolutism in Badiou's thinking, from which any form of politics is judged from the impossible standard of the 'event', akin to the Pauline miracle.³³ I agree that what we need today is a genuine politics defined by new practices of emancipation which break with existing forms, with the structures of the party and the state, and which invent new and innovative political relationships and ways of being. But the problem is that Badiou sets such an impossibly high and abstract standard for radical politics that almost nothing in his eyes lives up to the dignity of the event. For all his insistence that politics must be

²⁹ Alain Badiou, *Polemics*, trans., S. Corcoran, London: Verso, 2006, p. 321.

³⁰ Critchley makes a similar point about Badiou in *Infinitely Demanding*, p. 131.

³¹ See Day, *Gramsci is Dead*, for a survey of some of these groups and activities.

³² Simon Critchley, 'On Alain Badiou', *Theory & Event*, 3:4 (2000).

³³ See Badiou's discussion of the 'event' in *Being and Event*, trans., O. Feltham, London: Continuum, 2005. See also his discussion of Pauline universalism in *St Paul: the foundation of universalism*, trans., R. Brassier, Stanford, C.A.: Stanford University Press, 2003.

situated around the event, there is virtually no recognition of real, situated political struggles.

What is really behind this contempt for the politics of the everyday, I would argue, is a kind of elitism, which can be found in Badiou's fetishization of the militant. For Badiou, the figure of emancipatory politics is not the people or the masses, but the isolated militant engaged in a heroic struggle against overwhelming odds, fighting his or her own impulse to give up, to capitulate.³⁴ There is little emphasis here on building mass movements, on working to develop links between different groups, on the spontaneous self-organisation of people, on grass-roots direct action, on democratic decision-making, on decentralised social organisation, etc. Badiou seems to draw a line between the militant and the people—one almost hears echoes of Stalin here when he said, on Lenin's death, that “we Communists are people of a special mould. We are made of special stuff.”³⁵ This is perhaps an unfair characterisation—Badiou wants to see a new *non-party* form of militant; and, moreover, the militant is in a sense created retroactively by the event to which he or she declares fidelity, rather than being defined by a special essence which precedes it. Nevertheless there is an implicit vanguardism (not of the party, but of the militant) in Badiou's political thought. This is evident in his valorisation of authoritarian revolutionary figures such as Lenin, Mao and Robespierre. In his critique of Rancière, whom we shall discuss later, Badiou says: “He [Rancière] has the tendency to pit phantom masses against an unnamed State. But the real situation demands instead that we pit a few rare militants against the ‘democratic’ hegemony of the parliamentary State”.³⁶ There is no question that the ‘democratic’ hegemony of the parliamentary state must be challenged—but in the name of a more genuine democracy and through collective mass action.

For Ernesto Laclau, on the other hand, the figure of ‘the people’—rather than the militant—is central. His more recent work on populism shows the ways in which the notion of the people is discursively constructed in different situations through the development of hegemonic ‘chains of equivalence’ between different actors, groups

³⁴ See Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans., P. Hallward (London: Verso, 2001).

³⁵ J. Stalin, ‘On the Death of Lenin’. A speech delivered at the Second All-Union Congress of Soviets, 1924.

³⁶ Badiou, *Metapolitics*, p. 122.

and movements.³⁷ Laclau's thought—along with Chantal Mouffe's—has developed out of a critique of Marxism, one that incorporates discourse analysis, deconstruction and new social movement theory, and emphasises the contingency of political identities and the importance of a radically democratic imaginary. Indeed, post-Marxism has a number of important parallels with anarchism—particularly in its rejection of economic determinism and class essentialism. Laclau and Mouffe, in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, question the centrality of class to political subjectivity, and show that even in Marx's time, the struggles and identities of workers and artisans did not always conform to his conception of the proletariat: many of these struggles were against relations of subordination generally, and against the destruction of their organic, communal way of life through the introduction of the factory system and new forms of industrial technology such as Taylorism. Even more so today, the category of 'class' has become less applicable to the multiplicity of struggles and identities:

The unsatisfactory term 'new social movements' groups together a series of highly diverse struggles: urban, ecological, anti-authoritarian, anti-institutional, feminist, anti-racist, ethnic, regional or that of sexual minorities. The common denominator of all of them would be their differentiation from workers' struggles, considered as 'class' struggles.³⁸

This is not to say, of course, that workers' struggles and economic issues are no longer important—indeed, Laclau has argued that economic globalisation forms the new terrain around which political struggles are emerging. The point is that 'class', understood in the strict Marxist sense, is no longer adequate to describe radical political subjectivity today. As we have seen, precisely the same criticism of 'class' was made by anarchists like Bakunin well over a century before these post-Marxist interventions; as was the argument about the irreducibility (to the economic realm) of the political dimension of power, the notion that there were different sites of oppression—patriarchy, the family, industrial technology—as well as a number of other themes that later emerged as the central motifs of post-Marxism.

³⁷ See Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, London: Verso, 2005.

³⁸ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, London: Verso, 2001 [1985], p. 159.

Yet, I also think it important to draw certain distinctions between anarchism and post-Marxism. While post-Marxism makes an important contribution to the development of a new radical political terrain, it is also characterised by an underlying centralism which is inherent in the category of ‘representation’. There are different ways of understanding the representative function in Laclau’s argument, not all of which necessarily entail a notion of political representation or leadership. For instance, the notion that the empty universality of the political space can be filled temporarily with certain signifiers, like ‘global democracy’ or ‘the environment’—or even the claims of a particular group—around which other struggles and identities are discursively constructed, is, in my view, a necessary and inevitable aspect of any kind of radical politics which hopes to transcend the position of pure particularism. In other words, when a particular signifier stands in for the empty universality of the political space, this is a representative function through which other identities, causes and struggles can achieve some form of coherent meaning and unite with one another. There is nothing necessarily authoritarian about this sort of symbolic representation. Indeed, without this function of the ‘stand in’ there can be no real hope of radical politics. However, where this argument becomes problematic is when representation seems to translate into political leadership—into the idea that a radical political movement needs the figure of the leader to hold it together, and in whose person the disparate desires of the movement are temporarily united and imperfectly expressed. Indeed, the leadership function seems to be implicit in Laclau’s model of populism, and the examples he gives of populist movements—particularly Peronism in Argentina, and, more recently, the popular movements who support Chavez in Venezuela, a figure whom Laclau admires—are all movements strongly identified with, and organised around, the figure of the leader. Of course, these are not *entirely* authoritarian political movements—indeed, even the Venezuelan experience, which certainly has authoritarian tendencies, has nevertheless been experimenting with forms of popular, grass-roots democracy. But, from an anarchist perspective, the very notion of political leadership and sovereignty is inherently authoritarian—that is why anarchists rejected the idea of political representation. Representation always meant a leader, party or organisation speaking for the masses, and thus a transfer of power from the latter to

the former. Representation, for anarchists, always ended up with the state.³⁹ Perhaps this is also why for Laclau—as well as theorists of hegemony like Lenin and Gramsci—the state is always the stage for politics: hegemonic struggles always take place within the framework of the state, and are always fought with the aim of controlling state power.

Perhaps it is with a view of developing a new model of politics that is no longer reliant on notions of leadership, representation, sovereignty and the seizure of state power, that Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have proposed the concept of the multitude. The multitude is a new revolutionary subject which is emerging out of the social relationships and knowledge and communication networks produced by biopolitical production and ‘immaterial labour’—the increasingly dominant mode of production in our transnational world of global capitalism (whose political expression Empire). These new post-Fordist modes of labour and production tend towards a ‘being-in-common’, which produces a new social and political commonality where singularities are able to spontaneously act in common. For Hardt and Negri, the multitude is a class concept, but one that is different from the Marxist notion of the proletariat: it refers to all those who work under Empire, not simply, or even primarily blue collar workers. Its existence, moreover, is based on a becoming or immanent potential, rather than being defined by a strictly empirical existence; and it represents an irreducible multiplicity—a combination of collectivity and plurality—rather than a unified identity like ‘the people’. This immanent multiplicity has a tendency to converge into a common organism which will one day turn against Empire and emancipate itself:

When the flesh of the multitude is imprisoned and transformed into the body of global capital, it finds itself both within and against the processes of capitalist globalisation. The biopolitical production of the multitude, however, tends to mobilise what it shares in common and what it produces in common against the imperial power of global capital. In time, developing its productive figure based

³⁹ Todd May sees the critique of representation as being central to classical anarchism. See *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism*, University Park, Pennsylvania: Penn State Press, 1994.

on the common, the multitude can move through the Empire and come out the other side, to express itself autonomously and rule itself.⁴⁰

There are a number of interesting themes here, themes which have a clear resonance with anarchism, as well as applying to the emerging reality of anti-globalisation struggles. The notion of the multitude bears strong similarities to Bakunin's idea of the revolutionary mass, an entity defined by multiple identities and possibilities rather than by class unity and strict political organisation. Furthermore, there is the idea of acting in common, spontaneously and without centralised leadership—an idea which derives from anarchism, and which, as many commentators have noted, is a characteristic of contemporary anti-capitalist movements, activist networks and affinity groups. The multitude, according to Hardt and Negri, rejects the very notion of sovereignty: indeed, in the paradoxical relationship that has existed between the multitude and the sovereign which supposedly represents and embodies it—as in the Hobbesian depiction of sovereignty—it is always the sovereign that depends on the multitude rather than the other way round. Here Hardt and Negri talk about the 'exodus' of the multitude, a simple turning away from, or refusal to recognise, sovereignty, upon which, as in Hegel's Master/Slave dialectic, the sovereign would simply no longer exist.

There are, at the same time, a number of problems with this notion of the multitude. For instance, there is some question over how coherent and inclusive the concept of the multitude actually is. Hardt and Negri argue that the conditions for this new subjectivity are being created by a 'becoming-common' of labour: in other words, people are increasingly working under the same conditions of production within Empire and are therefore melding into a commonality, defined by new affective relationships and networks of communication. However, surely this ignores the major divisions that continue to exist in the conditions of labour between a salaried white collar worker in the West, and someone whose daily survival depends upon searching for scraps in garbage dumps in the slums of the global South. To what extent can we speak of any commonality between such radically different forms of 'work', such radically different experiences of oneself, one's body and one's existence? These two

⁴⁰ Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, p. 101.

people live not within the same Empire but in *totally different worlds*. In the case of the white collar worker, who perhaps works in the services sector, one can indeed speak of ‘immaterial labour’; while the slum dweller in the Third World is completely removed from this experience. The two share no common language. While it is true that ‘immaterial’ biopolitical production is increasingly penetrating the global South, there are still major economic and social divisions in conditions of work and modes of production, and therefore in the social relationships and forms of communication that flow from this. Our world is not a ‘smooth space’ as Hardt and Negri maintain, but a dislocated, uneven space—a world beset by major divisions and inequalities, exclusions and violent antagonisms. Indeed, rather than creating a borderless world of smooth flows and transactions, economic globalisation is producing new borders everywhere—symbolised by the Israeli ‘security’ wall, or the fence being constructed along the US-Mexico border. While capitalist globalisation is a process that is affecting the entire world, it is at the same time creating savage divisions between people and continents, offering some an unprecedented degree of material comfort, while consigning others in the global South to a crushing poverty and a radical exclusion from the market and from global circuits of production. To what extent, then, is it possible to talk about a new commonality defined by one’s incorporation into Empire and ‘immaterial labour’? Given these disparities and socio-economic divisions, would the multitude not be a highly fractured, divided body—or perhaps even a body from which are excluded those subjectivities that cannot be defined by immaterial labour, or indeed by any form of labour at all?⁴¹

This highlights the problem of trying to construct a common politics across such radically different forms of life and experience. What is missing from Hardt and Negri’s notion of the multitude is any account of how this can be constructed, how to build transnational alliances between people in the global North and South. Hardt and Negri simply assume that such a unity is already immanent within the productive dynamics of global capital, and therefore that the formation of the multitude is an inevitable and permanent potentiality. The problem, then, with Hardt and Negri’s notion of the multitude is that it seems in some senses to be nothing more than a

⁴¹ This query has also been raised by Jason Read in his review of Hardt and Negri’s *Multitude*, ‘From the Proletariat to the Multitude: *Multitude* and Political Subjectivity’, *Postmodern Culture* 15:2 (2005) http://muse.edu/journals/postmodern_culture/v015/15.2read.html See also Malcolm Bull, ‘The limits of the Multitude’, *New Left Review* 35 (Sept-Oct 2005): 19-39.

dressed up version of the Marxist theory of proletarian emancipation. The multitude is something that emerges organically through the dynamics of Empire and the hegemony of ‘immaterial labour’, just as, for Marx, the proletariat and proletarian class consciousness emerged according to the dynamics of industrial capitalism. In each scenario, moreover, this agency harnesses the economic forces of capitalism in order to transform them and create a new series of social relationships. In other words, there is an *immanentism* in Hardt and Negri’s analysis which seems to parallel Marxian economism: both suggest a kind of automatic process in which a new revolutionary class develops through the capitalist dynamic, until it eventually transcends it through a general revolt. What is lacking in this understanding of the multitude is any notion of *political* articulation—in other words, any explanation of how this multitude comes together and why it revolts. Here I think Laclau is right when he says about Hardt and Negri’s analysis, that “we have the complete eclipse of politics.”⁴²

Rancière and the anarchism of equality

Jacques Rancière, on the other hand, proposes a very different notion of radical politics to that of the multitude—for him, politics emerges out of a fractured rather than smooth space, something that ruptures existing social relations from the outside rather than being immanent within them. Rancière’s notion of politics also has strong, and at times explicit, parallels with anarchism, as well as, as I shall show, having important implications for it. Indeed, Rancière at times describes his approach to politics as ‘anarchic’: for instance, he sees democracy—which for him has nothing to do with the aggregation of preferences or a particular set of institutions, but is rather an egalitarian form of politics in which all hierarchical social relationships are destabilised—as “anarchic ‘government’... based on nothing other than the absence of every title to govern.”⁴³ Moreover, his whole political project has been to disturb existing hierarchies and forms of authority, to unseat the position of mastery from which the masses are led, excluded, dominated, spoken for and despised. Any form of vanguard politics is, for Rancière, simply another expression of elitism and contempt for ordinary people. Indeed, these ‘ordinary’ people are actually extraordinary, being capable of emancipating themselves without the intervention of revolutionary parties.

⁴² Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 242.

⁴³ Jacques Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, trans., S. Corcoran, London: Verso, 2006, p. 41.

We can see this idea particularly in Rancière's study of the French nineteenth century schoolteacher Joseph Jacotot, who developed what was essentially an anarchist model of education where he was able to teach students in a language that he did not speak himself, and where students were able to use this method to teach themselves and others. The discovery that one did not need to be an expert in a subject—or even have any real knowledge of it—in order to teach it, undermined the posture of mastery and intellectual authority, a posture that all institutionalised forms of politics are based on (the authority of professional politicians, experts, technocrats, economists, those who claim to have a technical knowledge that the people do not). All forms of political and social domination rest upon a presupposed inequality of intelligence, through which hierarchy is naturalised and the position of subordination comes to be accepted. And so if, as Jacotot's experiment showed, there is actually an *equality of intelligence*—the idea that no one is naturally more or less intelligent than anyone else, that everyone is equally capable of learning and teaching themselves—this fundamentally jeopardises the inegalitarian principle that the social order is founded upon. This form of intellectual emancipation suggests a profoundly egalitarian politics—a politics that not only seeks equality, but, more importantly, is founded on the absolute *fact* of equality. In other words, politics, for Rancière, *starts* with the fact of equality: “Equality was not an end to attain, but a point of departure, a supposition to maintain in every circumstance.”⁴⁴ Furthermore, emancipation was not something that could be achieved *for* the people—it had to be achieved *by* the people, as a part of a process of self-emancipation in which there was a recognition by the individual of the equality of others: “... [T]here is only one way to emancipate. And no party or government, no army, school, or institution, will ever emancipate a single person.”⁴⁵

Clearly, these ideas of self-emancipation, autonomy and the destabilisation of social and political hierarchies through the recognition and assertion of the fundamental equality of all speaking beings, have clear similarities with anarchism.⁴⁶ Rancière's thought *is* a kind of anarchism, in which the domination—and the ‘passion for

⁴⁴ Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans., K. Ross, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991, p. 138.

⁴⁵ Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, p. 102.

⁴⁶ Todd May has also recognised the importance of Rancière's thought for anarchism. See Todd May, ‘Jacques Rancière and the Ethics of Equality’, *SubStance* #113, Vol. 36, no. 2, 2007: 20-35.

inequality' upon which it rests—is questioned at its most fundamental level. However, I would suggest that Rancière's conception of politics also allows us to rethink certain aspects of anarchism and to take it in new theoretical and political directions. Central here would be a certain realignment of anarchism, no longer around an opposition between society and the state, but between 'politics' and 'the police'. In other words, the central antagonism is not so much between two entities, but between two different modes of relating to the world. Police refers to the rationality of 'counting' that founds the existing social order—a logic that partitions and regulates the social space, assigning different identities to their place within the social hierarchy. In this sense, police would include the usual coercive and repressive functions of the state, but it also refers to a much broader notion of the organisation and regulation of society—the distribution of places and roles. In other words, domination and hierarchy cannot be confined to the state, but are in fact located in all sorts of social relationships—indeed, domination is a particular logic of social organisation, in which people are consigned to certain roles such as 'worker', or 'delinquent', or 'illegal immigrant', or 'woman', to which are attributed particular identities.

Politics, on the other hand, is the process which disrupts this logic of social ordering—which ruptures the social space through the demand by the excluded for inclusion. For Rancière, politics emerges from a fundamental dispute or 'disagreement' (*mesentente*) between a particular group which is excluded and the existing social order: this excluded social group not only demands that its voice be heard, that it be included in the social order, but, more precisely, it claims in doing so to represent the whole of society. What is central to politics, then, according to Rancière, is that an excluded part not only demands to be *counted* as part of the social whole, but that it claims to actually embody this whole. Rancière shows the way that in ancient Greece the demos—or 'the people', the poor—which had no fixed place in the social order, demanded to be included, demanded that its voice be heard by the aristocratic order and, in doing so, claimed to represent the universal interests of the whole of society. In other words, there is a kind of metonymical substitution of the *part for the whole*—the part represents its struggle in terms of a universality: its particular interests are represented as being identical to those of the community as a whole. In this way, the 'simple' demand to be included causes a rupture or dislocation

in the existing social order: this part could not be included without disturbing the very logic of a social order based on this exclusion. To give a contemporary example: the struggles of ‘illegal’ immigrants—perhaps the most excluded group today—to be given a place within society, to have their status legitimised, would create a kind of contradiction in the social order which refuses to include or even recognise them, which promises equal and democratic rights to everyone, and yet denies them to this particular group. In this way, the demand of the ‘illegals’ to be counted as ‘citizens’ highlights the inconsistency of the situation in which universal democratic rights are promised to all, but in practice are granted to only some; it shows that any fulfilment of the democratic promise of universal rights is at the very least conditional on *their* recognition also as citizens with equal rights. The discursive ‘stage’ upon which politics takes place is therefore an inconsistency within the structure of universality, between its promise and its actualisation. To give a further example: the protests that took place in France in 2004 over the ban on Islamic headscarves in schools, pointed to the inconsistency of a situation in which, on the one hand, everyone is formally recognised as having equal rights as citizens of the French Republic, while on the other hand, laws are introduced—in *the very name of this Republican ideal of equality*—which obviously discriminate against and target certain minorities. It was therefore a mistake to claim, as both conservative and socialist MPs did, that protests and acts of resistance against the headscarf law were anti-Republican: on the contrary, the Muslim women protesting against the headscarf ban waved the tricolor and held placards with the words *Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite*. By identifying with the ideals of the Republic, they highlighted, in a very effective way, the fact that they were excluded from these ideals. Their message was that they believe in the Republic *but the Republic does not believe in them*. Here we see the excluded part claiming to represent the universality of the egalitarian ideal through the simple demand to be counted. So for Rancière: “politics exists whenever the count of parts and parties of society is disturbed by the inscription of a part of those who have no part.”⁴⁷

While it might seem that the demand for inclusion into the existing social, legal and political order is not an anarchist strategy, the point is that this demand for inclusion, because it is framed in terms of a universality, of a part which, *in its very exclusion*,

⁴⁷ Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans., J. Rose, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999, p. 123.

claims to the whole, causes a dislocation of this order. In this sense, radical politics today might take the form of mass movements which construct themselves around particularly marginalised and excluded groups, such as the poor or ‘illegal’ immigrants. This does not, of course, mean that mass movements should not be concerned with general global issues such as the environment; but mobilising around particular structures of domination and exclusion, and around those who are most affected by them, can be an effective form of resistance. For instance, fighting for the rights of ‘illegal’ immigrants—as activist networks such as No Borders do—highlights broader contradictions and inconsistencies in global capitalism, a system which claims to promote the free movement of people (as well as capital and technology) across national borders, and yet which seems to be having precisely the opposite effect—the intensification of existing borders and the erection of new ones.⁴⁸ In other words, the situation of ‘illegal’ immigrants is a crucial point of antagonism and contradiction in the global capitalist system—and mobilisations around this can have potentially explosive and transformative effects.

However, the theoretical importance for anarchism of Rancière’s understanding of politics lies in its understanding of political subjectification. For anarchists—particularly the classical anarchists—the subject revolts partly because, as Bakunin would say, there is a natural and spontaneous tendency to revolt, but, more precisely, because the subject is intrinsically and organically part of society, and society is conditioned by a certain essence—which is both rational and natural—which unfolds in the direction of revolution and emancipation. In other words, anarchism is based not only on a certain vision of human emancipation and social progress, but on the idea of a social rationality which is inexorably moving in that direction. This idea might be seen in Bakunin’s materialist understanding of natural and historical laws—laws that are scientifically observable⁴⁹—or Kropotkin’s belief that there is an innate and evolutionary tendency towards mutualism within all living beings⁵⁰, or, in Murray Bookchin’s conception, the potential for ‘wholeness’ that is central to his idea of

⁴⁸ See explorations of the politics of borders, migration and globalisation in the work of Étienne Balibar (*We the People of Europe: Reflections on Transnational Citizenship*, trans., J. Swenson, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); as well as Sandro Mezzadra (‘Migration, Detention, Desertion: A Dialogue’, with Brett Neilson, *Borderlands*, 2/1, 2003.

<http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol2no1_2003/mezzadra_neilson.html>

⁴⁹ Bakunin, *Political Philosophy*, p. 69.

⁵⁰ Peter Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution*, London: Allen Lane, 1972.

‘social ecology’.⁵¹ What we find here is the idea of social progress, whether driven by the dialectic, or the laws of nature or history. Central here is the view of the human subject as not only essentially benign (for Kropotkin, humans had a natural tendency towards cooperation) but as inextricably part of the social fabric. Radical political subjectivity, for anarchists, is an expression of this inherent sociality.

Rancière’s view of political subjectification would be somewhat different from this. There is no natural or social tendency towards revolution; instead, what is important is the unpredictability and contingency of politics. Furthermore, the political subject is not founded on essentialist conceptions of human nature; rather, the subject emerges in an unpredictable fashion through a rupturing of fixed social roles and identities. This last point is important. For Rancière, political subjectification is not the affirmation or expression of an innate sociality, but rather a break with the social. It is a kind of de-subjectification or ‘dis-identification’—a “removal from the naturalness of place”—in which one distances oneself from one’s normal social role:

[P]olitical subjectification forces them out of such obviousness by questioning the relationship between the *who* and the *what* in the apparent redundancy of the positing of an existence... ‘Worker’ or better still ‘proletarian’ is similarly the subject that measures the gap between the part of work as social function and the having no part of those who carry it out within the definition of the common of the community.⁵²

Rather than political subjectivity emerging as immanent within society, it is something that, in a sense, comes from ‘outside’ it—not in terms of some metaphysical exteriority, but in terms of a process of disengagement from established subject positions and social identities.

Postanarchism

What I am pointing to here—via Rancière—is not some kind of radical or existential individualism, in which the subject is an isolated monad who acts in a political

⁵¹ See Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy*, AK Press, 2005.

⁵² Rancière, *Disagreement*, p. 36.

vacuum.⁵³ Obviously, radical politics involves developing links with others, and building new political relationships, new understandings of community. But the point is that these cannot be understood as being founded on a certain conception of human nature, or as emerging inevitably from social processes. Rather, they are always to be constructed, and they often have unpredictable and contingent effects. There is no inevitability in this process, as there was for classical anarchists.

It is this idea of unpredictability, invention and contingency that I see as central to a new way of thinking about anarchism—one that avoids the sort of humanist essentialism and positivism that characterised much of classical anarchism. My contention has been that anarchism, as a political philosophy, is in need of renewal, and that it can take advantage of theoretical moves such as deconstruction, poststructuralism and psychoanalysis in the same way that, for instance, certain post-Marxist perspectives have done⁵⁴ (notwithstanding the differences that I have already pointed to between anarchism and post-Marxism). This would mean a *partial* abandonment—or at least a revising—of the Enlightenment humanist discourse that anarchism has been indebted to: an abandonment of essentialist ideas about human nature, of social positivism, of ideas about an immanent social rationality that drives revolutionary change. Instead, anarchist theory would have to acknowledge that social reality is discursively constructed, and that the subject is situated, and even constituted, within external relations of language and power, as well as unconscious forces, desires and drives which often exceed his rational control.⁵⁵ However, this does not mean—as many have wrongly suggested in reference to thinkers like Foucault—that the subject is determined by social structures or caught in ‘disciplinary cages’. On the contrary, poststructuralist approaches seek openings, interstices, indeterminacies, *aporias* and cracks within structures—points where they become displaced and unstable, and where new possibilities for political subjectification can emerge. Indeed, this view of the relationship between the subject and social

⁵³ Max Stirner’s notion egoism, for instance, while it offers an important philosophical intervention in anarchist theory—particularly in developing a critique of essentialism—does not necessarily offer a convincing or complete model of political action. See *The Ego and Its Own*, ed. David Leopold, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

⁵⁴ See, primarily, the work of Laclau and Mouffe.

⁵⁵ Cornelius Castoriadis, a psychoanalytic theorist whose political thought has close affinities with anarchism, talks about the role of imaginary significations in constructing social reality. See *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans., K. Blamey, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997.

structures, I would suggest, actually allows for a greater degree of autonomy and spontaneity than that posited by classical anarchists. That is to say, the ‘poststructuralist’ approach breaks the link between subjectivity and social essence, allowing a certain discursive space in which subjectivity can be reconfigured. The aim, from a poststructuralist point of view, would be for the subject to gain a certain distance from the discursive fields in which his/her identity is constituted—and it is precisely this distance, this gap, which is the space of politics because it allows the subject to develop new forms and practices of freedom and equality.

The term ‘postanarchism’ therefore refers not so much to a distinct model of anarchist politics, but rather to a certain field of inquiry and ongoing problematisation in which the conceptual categories of anarchism are rethought in light of such poststructuralist interventions. This does not, in any sense, refer to a superseding or moving beyond of anarchism—it does not mean that the anarchist theoretical and political project should be left behind. On the contrary, I have argued for the ongoing relevance of anarchism, particularly to understanding contemporary political struggles and movements. The term ‘post’ does not mean ‘after’ or ‘beyond’, but rather a working at the conceptual limits of anarchism with the aim of revising, renewing and even radicalising its implications. Postanarchism, in this sense, is still faithful to the egalitarian and libertarian project of classical anarchism—yet it contends that this project is best formulated today through a different conceptualisation of subjectivity and politics: one that is no longer founded on essentialist notions of human nature or the unfolding of an immanent social rationality.

There are a number of other thinkers who seek to reconstruct anarchism along these or similar lines, most notably Lewis Call⁵⁶ and Todd May. May, in particular, develops a poststructuralist approach to anarchist politics, highlighting the connections between classical anarchism’s critique of representation and poststructuralist thinkers like Foucault, Deleuze and Lyotard, whose ‘tactical’ rather than ‘strategic’ approach to politics emphasises particular and situated ‘micro-political’ practices. There are clear parallels between May’s approach to post-anarchism and mine. But there are also

⁵⁶ See Lewis Call, *Postmodern Anarchism*, Lexington Books, 2003. One could also mention John Holloway here, although he comes more from the libertarian Marxist—rather than strictly anarchist—tradition. See *Change the World Without Taking Power: The Meaning of Revolution Today*, Pluto Press, 2005.

differences, most noticeably in the different thinkers and perspectives we draw upon. While I deploy the ideas of Foucault and Deleuze, I have also drawn upon thinkers like Derrida—whom May explicitly rules out on the grounds that he has no clearly articulated political position⁵⁷—and Lacan. In May’s work, there is a general avoidance of psychoanalysis. However, while many anarchists might be sceptical about psychoanalysis, pointing to what they perceive as its generally apolitical conservatism, its focus on the individual psyche, and, as some feminists, would claim, its ‘phallogocentrism’⁵⁸, I would argue that psychoanalytic theory—particularly that of Freud and Lacan—can offer important resources for radical political theory. Indeed, rather than focusing on the isolated individual psyche, psychoanalysis stresses the social dimension, the individual’s relations with those around him or her—not only with family members but with society more broadly. As Freud demonstrates, psychoanalysis is concerned with “social phenomena”, including the formation of groups, and is thus eminently equipped for socio-political analysis.⁵⁹ For Lacan, the individual (partially) constructs his or her subjectivity through a relationship with the external world of language, the symbolic order through which all meaning is derived—and, therefore, for Lacan, the unconscious was “*structured like a language*.”⁶⁰ The psychoanalytic unconscious is not individualising and therefore reactionary, as Deleuze and Guattari alleged in *Anti-Oedipus*. On the contrary, it is *intersubjective* and can therefore be applied not only to an analysis and critique of existing socio-political relationships, but also to an understanding of radical political identities. Indeed, I do not think it is possible to get anywhere near a full conception of political agency and subjectivity without an understanding of the unconscious forces and desires which in large part drive political action, structure our political, ideological and symbolic identifications, or impel our psychic attachments—‘passionate attachments’ as Judith Butler would put it⁶¹—to authority and domination,

⁵⁷ See May, *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism*, p. 12. Here I would disagree with May—in recent years Derrida had been increasingly engaged with political questions regarding law, justice, democracy, Marxism, human rights and sovereignty.

⁵⁸ However, a number of major feminist critiques of ‘phallogocentrism’ have at the same time been inspired by psychoanalysis. I have in mind here thinkers such as Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva.

⁵⁹ Sigmund Freud, ‘Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego’ (1921), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans., James Strachey, London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1975, p. 69.

⁶⁰ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI*, ed., J-A Miller and trans., A. Sheridan, London: W.W Norton & Co, 1998, p. 20.

⁶¹ See Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 1997.

as well as the ways that we at times break with and resist them. Psychoanalysis, in my view, is crucial to developing a fuller account of the potentialities of the subject—one that goes beyond the Foucauldian notion of ‘subject positions’.

Moreover, the focus on the unconscious does not lead, as some would suggest, back to an essentialism of the subject. On the contrary, the Freudian and Lacanian understanding of the unconscious shows that the subject is always, as it were, ‘at a distance’ from him or herself, and that one cannot achieve a full and completely unalienated and transparent identity. As Lacan showed, rather than there being an essence at the base of subjectivity there was a lack, an absence, a void in signification.⁶²

If the only issue here was a different philosophical genealogy, then this question of the alternative approaches chosen by me and Todd May would hardly be worth mentioning. However, what is invoked by this difference is the broader debate that has been recently emerging in radical political philosophy over the question of ontology: to be more precise, the debate around *abundance* and *lack*—or, put thought about slightly differently, *immanence* and *transcendence*—as the two rival conceptions of radical political ontology today. This question has, according to Lasse Thomassen and Lars Tónder, been at the base of different understandings of radical democratic politics:

[E]xisting literature has failed to appreciate the way in which the conceptualisation of radical difference has led to significantly different versions of radical democracy - what we refer to as the ontological imaginary of abundance and the ontological imaginary of lack respectively. These two imaginaries share the idea of a radical difference and the critique of conventional conceptualisations of universality and identity; yet they also differ in the manner in which they approach these questions. For instance, they disagree on whether political analysis should start from the level of signification or from networks of embodied matter. And they disagree on the kind of politics that follows from the idea of radical difference: whereas theorists of lack

⁶² Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p. 126.

emphasise the need to build hegemonic constellations, theorists of abundance emphasise never-receding pluralisation.⁶³

This debate has some relevance to post-anarchism today, as many poststructuralist-inspired theorists of contemporary activism—Hardt and Negri being among the most prominent, but also Richard J.F. Day⁶⁴—tend to see a Deleuzo-Spinozian motif of immanence, abundance, flux and becoming as the most appropriate way of thinking about the decentralised affinity groups and ‘rhizomatic’ networks that characterise anti-capitalist radical politics today.

Although I have always considered the anti-statist thought of Deleuze (and Guattari) to be invaluable for radical politics⁶⁵, my own approach tends to place more emphasis on the idea of a ‘constitutive outside’: the idea—theorised in different ways by thinkers like Lacan and Derrida—of a kind of discursive limit or void which exceeds representation and symbolisation. I do not agree with Andrew Robinson that it posits a myth-like abstraction which leads to an apolitical conservatism.⁶⁶ If one accepts the idea that social reality is constructed at some level discursively—that is through relations of language through which we form meaning and identities—then this idea is only consistent if one posits a logical limit or outside to discourse; and it is at this limit that new ways of understanding the world politically can emerge. This can produce conservative and pragmatist articulations of the political, certainly—or even conservative positions in the guise of ultra-radicalism, in the way we have seen with someone like Žižek. But there is nothing intrinsically conservative or apolitical about the idea of negativity and lack, as Robinson seems to suggest—and, indeed, a certain understanding of negativity, as Stirner and even Bakunin themselves showed, can have radical implications. Nor do I agree with May that this sort of ontology leads to a politics of indeterminacy that makes it unsuitable for collective action.⁶⁷ On the

⁶³Lars Tønder and Lasse Thomassen, ed., *Radical Democracy: Politics between Abundance and Lack*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005, pp. 1-2.

⁶⁴ See Richard J.F. Day, *Gramsci is Dead: Anarchist Currents in the Newest Social Movements*, London: Pluto Press, 2005.

⁶⁵ See, for instance, my article, ‘War on the State: Deleuze and Stirner’s Anarchism’, *Anarchist Studies*, 9, 2, 2001.

⁶⁶ Andrew Robinson, ‘The Political Theory of Constitutive Lack: A Critique’, *Theory & Event*, 8: 1, 2005.

⁶⁷ See Todd May’s review of my book, *From Bakunin to Lacan: ‘Lacanian Anarchism and the Left’*, *Theory & Event*, 6, 1, 2002.

contrary, I would suggest that the idea of an ‘outside’ allows for a space or terrain in which new practices of emancipation can be developed.

Conclusion

Indeed, what I see as particularly important is the need to develop a universal dimension for collective politics—one which is built upon localised practices of resistance, but which also goes beyond them and allows links to emerge between actors on a politico-ethical terrain defined by an unconditional liberty and equality. This is why the question of radical democracy is central: radical democracy—seen as a series of mobilisations and practices of emancipation, rather than as a specific set of institutional arrangements⁶⁸—is the form of politics that allows liberty and equality to be combined and rearticulated in all sorts of unpredictable ways. However, I would also suggest that anarchism can be seen as providing the ultimate politico-ethical horizon for radical democracy. As anarchism shows, the central and fundamental principle of democracy—collective autonomy and egalitarian emancipation—is something that cannot be wholly contained within the limits of state sovereignty. At its very least, it is a principle which always challenges the idea of political authority.

⁶⁸ I have in mind here something like Derrida’s notion of the ‘democracy to come’, which, so far from being a way of putting off or postponing political decision-making (as May seems to be implying) actually invokes the immediacy of the present, and calls for a militant critique of all existing articulations of democracy in the name of an infinite perfectibility. See *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans., Pascale-Anne Brault and Michel Naas, Stanford Ca.,: Stanford University Press, 2005, pp. 86-90.