

Deconstructing Anarchy

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1.

Although sometimes tempered by nostalgic overtones, the current meaning of the word “anarchy” remains pejorative. It is taken as the negation of principle and command, but even more often as the absence of government and therefore as disorder.

Sovereignty is thus legitimized as the only condition for order, the sole alternative to the crippling absence of government. Anarchy becomes another way of indicating the wild chaos that would rage in the unlimited space beyond state sovereignty. This is why the history of the word and its uses goes far beyond semantic interest and reveals a conception of political architecture that has grown stronger over the centuries.

Hobbes’ successful narrative is at work here. Established to overcome the chaos of nature from which civil conflict must continually arise, sovereign power would be the result of a shared pact, of a willing submission to authority. Hobbes goes so far as to make the state a “person,” an almost anthropomorphic figure whose internal sovereignty, absolute and unquestionable, corresponds to an external sovereignty embodied by the other sovereign states. In a move destined to have long-lasting effects, it projects the Leviathan beyond its borders, the beast of primitive chaos, chosen as the emblem of state power. Wild unruliness, restrained within, is instead unleashed outside in the permanent virtual war between the state wolves, the sovereign Leviathans.

The dichotomy between inside and outside, sovereignty and anarchy, runs through all of modern thought. Right up to the present day it imposes a hierarchy of problems, prescribes solutions, justifies principles: above all that of the obedience to sovereign power. Needless to say, value judgments are introduced: on the one hand, *internal space*, where one can aim at living well, where progress, justice, democracy and human rights are affirmed; and on the other, external space, where at best survival is a given, where only the vague cosmopolitan projects of a confederation of peoples seem possible, if not the re-proposition of a world state.

Globalization changes the scenario but does not actually challenge the dichotomy between sovereignty and anarchy. It does, however, broaden the perspective, revealing the limits of a politics predicated on traditional borders, unable to see beyond them. The landscape appears more complicated than ever because, while the nation-states continue to impose the regulatory framework of events, the real and virtual spaces that open up between one border and another are being populated by other protagonists. This leads us to take leave of the dichotomy between the inside and the outside, the civilized and the uncivilized, between order and chaos.

To find a way in an unknown landscape we would need suitable maps, which do not presently exist. Still, new phenomena such as global migrations allow a glimpse of what is happening on the outside. Similarly, current revolts are largely taking place beyond sovereignty, in the open space that has always been relegated to anarchy. This openness should be understood not only as a boundary between one place and another, but also as a fissure, as an interstitial space within the internal scenario. The revolt that undermines the *archē* — the principle and order of political architecture, of the state-centric order — is an anarchic revolt. It violates state borders, denationalizes the supposed citizens, alienates them and renders them temporarily stateless, invites them to proclaim themselves resident foreigners.

The undisputed sovereignty of the state, considered an indispensable means and a supreme end, remains the defining criterion which maps the contemporary scene and outlines the limits of political philosophy. The good administration of the *pólis* is judged from this perspective — without any critique of the ways in which the *pólis* is constituted. The paradigmatic case is Rawls’

theory of justice. Political philosophy relaunches powerful fictions: from that of a mythical contract to which every citizen consents, to that of birth which, by way of a signature, creates membership in a nation and authorizes return to the homeland. As if borders were ineluctable, as if a community governed by genetic descent were self-evident. Such presuppositions are taken as natural givens and thus excluded from politics, or rather: depoliticized. But then a political philosophy would be based on a non-political foundation. Faced with a philosophy that remains confined within state boundaries, the need arises for an anarchic trans-politics, *oltre politica*.

2.

How can the word “anarchy” be redeemed, if not through anarchic archaeology? We look to the Greek context. The compound comes from joining the privative prefix *a-* or *an-* (as in atonal, aniconic, or atopia) to the verb *árcho*, to command. In short, *anarchía* means absence of command, lack of government, want of order. As early as Homer, *ánarchos* meant a group without leadership.

Closely connected with the military and juridical spheres in the classical period, *anarchía* assumed increasingly nebulous meanings without losing its privative force. Its two aspects mirror each other: absence of government on the one side, but also lawbreaking and revolt on the other. As the great historian of anarchism, Max Nettlau, wrote: “The Greek term anarchy refers to individuals who consciously spurned authority and rejected government; only when they began to be opposed and persecuted did the name come to designate those dangerous rebels who endangered order.”

Interesting, however, are the first reflections on anarchy in the *pólis*. Tremendous and deadly specters haunt the city. Aeschylus warns against excess and praises life, *bíos*, that is “neither anarchy nor tyranny,” neither *ánarchos* nor *despotóúmenos*. Already here anarchy and tyranny appear to be the two looming threats. But in the end, only anarchy is the real political risk. Sophocles has Creon say as much: “The decreed leader of the city, whoever he may be, must be obeyed [...]. There is no worse misfortune than anarchy.” In the *Laws*, Plato takes up Sophocles’ warning almost to the letter: “Every human society is destined by nature to have a leader.” And again: “Anarchy must be absolutely eliminated from the life of every human being and also from the animals that serve him.”

But for Plato, anarchy is not merely an unnatural disorder. In a more political sense it represents the inseparable shadow of democracy, the perennial nightmare of its ruin. The same is true in Aristotle. Although it evokes similar compound words such as “monarchy” or “oligarchy,” there is no doubt that anarchy is seen by both as non-constitution. The negation of the privative alpha prevails. Condemned to a dark and indistinct nebula, the absence of command defies imagination and eludes the reach of thought schooled on *kósmos* and *péras*, on order and limit. Even concrete disorder has many faces: that of *tarachē* and *stásis*, of sedition and civil war. That which escapes the *archē* is excluded from the *pólis*. This exclusion will have decisive effects on political theory.

In the transition from Greek to Latin, a further meaning comes to light. In Latin, *archē* is mainly translated as *principium*. It is then clear that *archē* is anything but monolithic, split as it is between two meanings: origin or principle on the one hand, command or rule on the other. This doubling also applies to the verb *archō*, which means, “to take the lead, to precede, to guide,”

but also “to rule, to command.” That which comes first leads the way, the beginning commands, the origin governs — not only birth, but also growth, development, history.

That beginning and command should converge is not at all obvious. The beginning claims the command — the command claims the beginning. As Agamben puts it, the “prestige of origin” may explain why the semantic discrepancy underlying *archē* is usually received as self-evident.

After all, why should the first be the leader? And why should the ruler be the first? Very different meanings are brought closer until they overlap and collide. But perhaps it is precisely the word *archē* — its prestige acquired by habit — that may have dictated the coincidence. Inauguration and command — as Greek has it, followed by many other languages — are intimately connected, a consubstantial whole. The repercussions are theological, political, and philosophical.

An an-archic archaeology, which is not only a ruinology, but also defuses, disempowers, and deconstructs the *arché*, cannot but unearth the archaic complicity. It brings to light that alliance of power, disconnects principle and command.

3.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in the wake of the French Revolution, anarchy increasingly became a positive concept. It took a place among the forms of government. Proudhon’s famous claim that “anarchy is order without domination” marks a before and an after.

Except, the turn has ended up producing a structural collapse and led to the erasure of that prefixed alpha at the root of anarchy. Herein lies the problem of classical anarchism which, from Godwin to Bakunin, has fallen into the trap of naively understood relations of force. Consider the very modern way of understanding both the subject and the state that culminates in a Manichaeic vision: if the subject were by nature good and the state bad, it would be enough to overturn the scheme offered by Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, whereby the good state redeems the human individual otherwise doomed to wolfishness. Precisely this simplification has not worked — not even in politics.

Modernity, of which anarchism has been the child, constitutes the impasse. Those metaphysical limits within which it remains caught and which end up having inevitable political repercussions are now evident. Anarchists, not fully realizing the subversive potential, enclose anarchy in an *archē*, making of it a principle and a command. Hence the naïveté, the illusions, the mistakes. This emerges in the vision of the individual who faces power, is struggling in the dilemma of seizing it once and for all but without allowing himself to be taken possession of. Precisely this refusal of any mediation, together with a reductive conception of power, assimilated to a scourge, has condemned the anarchist movement to a series of defeats. This failure is all the more serious because anarchy, understood as the autonegation of power, should have opened up a new political space. Yet it is as if the anarchists refused to inhabit that bottomless abyss from which another politics could have anarchically arisen. Instead they took cover behind the archic foxhole of a principle.

4.

Is it possible to save ‘anarchy’ from anarchism today? Is there still any chance today, and if so, how?

With its tragic past and its impossible future, anarchism seems to have been relegated to a proud and stubborn but also esoteric and cultic memory. Its sacred texts, assembled in an inviolable canonical *corpus*, lay claim to faith and observance. The anarchists seem largely institutionalized: they refer to a liturgy, they follow a catechism, they cultivate the unshakable certainty that every answer is contained in those texts of nineteenth- and twentieth-century orthodoxy.

This can be confirmed by the historical reconstructions which, despite some slight differences, have fossilized around the same commonplaces, the same scansions, the same doctrinal and ideological dogmas that have been established and ratified over the centuries. The epic repeats itself: after the precursors, a succession is opened by Godwin, followed by Proudhon; the river then splits between the current inaugurated by Stirner, champion of radical individualism, and that initiated by Kropotkin, exponent of collectivism. The summit is reached with Bakunin. Surrounding him are a multitude of figures whose worldviews are often at odds with each other. Everything then comes to a standstill – apart from a few exceptions, such as Murray Bookchin and Noam Chomsky – in the first decades of the twentieth century. The official history of anarchism is, in short, no different from any other historiography with its paradigms, its dogmas, its principles. Fideistic petrification runs the risk of winding up in gloomy sectarianism and catastrophic stagnation.

We may well be tempted to suppose that the bell for the end has been rung for some time now, were it not for the fact that the torch of anarchy has never been extinguished. Heterodox and subversive, the Circle-A, perhaps the most widespread political symbol in the world, exceeds classic iconography and shows a vitality that goes beyond traditional anarchism.

The economy of the archive opposes the an-archic impulse. There emerges then a need to *not* archive anarchism, or rather, to not let it be archived. Archive fever afflicts the anarchist, that dissident angel who is called on to not forget that in the order of the beginning, as in that of the command the *archē* is a fiction. The alternative would be the embarrassing figure of an institutional anarchist claiming exclusive access to the true memory, to ownership of the texts, to the arcane and patriarchal power of an authentic origin. In his impossible nostalgia, he would only have the keys to a house inhabited by ghosts. It is here that the unarchivable anarchism must act to escape the violence of the old archives. Even their own.

Silent by vocation, anarchism will always be the destroyer of every archive. Destroying means here deconstructing, interpreting, reading deeply into archaeological and genealogical excavations so as to disarticulate the corpus of texts and desegregate the semantics of the archive.

5.

In recent decades an anarchic vein in philosophy has emerged. This is not surprising, given that continental thought is characterized by its unfolding from the abyssal depths that it can no longer avoid.

Heidegger was the pioneer in destroying official pathways of all sorts. He inaugurated what can be called “post-fundamentalism.” If Husserl remains kept by a conception of philosophy that

still required an “ultimate foundation,” for Heidegger it is time to take leave of all the errors of metaphysics, to say farewell to any uncontested, stable and firm foundation whenever that foundation turns out to be broken and precarious. This is so in the case of that foundation of the universe, a status to which the modern subject promoted itself: the sovereign who, self-assured, sure of founding itself in its autonomy, should instead recognize itself as having been “thrown” into the world, as being inexorably temporal and irreversibly finite.

The event that shakes the ultimate foundation literally upends philosophy, shakes it up, leaves it cracked and fissured, leaves it *open*. The bottomless abyss of every foundation is thus unsealed. *Ab-grund* is therefore the name that, preserving within the very word itself the crucial gap, calls to mind what is by now an abyssal un-foundation.

One should not, however, misunderstand Heidegger’s gesture, which is limited to taking note of that event. It is not a question of denying or refuting. Rather, it is a matter of admitting that undisputed foundations are no longer given. This also applies to as many mirages connected to a whole series of well-known, much-invoked foundations, including: being, substance, essence, structure, universality, identity, gender, state, and nation. Heidegger does not abandon the territory of metaphysics, but remains there to oversee its disintegration, to dig down into it, to let the abyss rise through the cracks.

Post-foundationalist philosophy, which questions every *archē*, takes leave of the archic act. There are many names that could be mentioned. The Grand Hotel Abyss, which had already welcomed members of the Frankfurt School, Benjamin, Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse, has not closed its doors. Other guests come and go, with different looks and new perspectives.

A prominent place is occupied by Reiner Schürmann, author of *Heidegger on Being and Acting: From Principles to Anarchy*, published for the first time in French in 1982, in English in 1987. One could read his pages as a long commentary that aims to democratize Heidegger, i.e., to show that he does not mythologize the origin, that he does not assert the principle, nor simply identify himself with the *Führerprinzip*. Instead, he thinks the anarchic dissolution of all *archē*.

Quickly leaving politics behind, Schürmann focuses attention on the deconstruction of metaphysics, a project that is neither innocent nor harmless. In order to bring to light the disruptive charge latent in the broken foundation, he proposes a paradoxical expression: “the principle of anarchy.” The contradiction between the two terms is evident. Schürmann warns against any attempt at reconciliation or overcoming. The “principle of anarchy” is an anarchic principle which, by destituting itself, prevents anarchy from becoming, in turn, a principle. In the history of the principles that have governed the epochs of the world, there is still a paradoxical anarchic principle, prelude to the overthrow of every principle, which carries anarchy inscribed within itself, as destiny.

Unavoidable, therefore, is the transition to an-archic history that opens up new scenarios. However, the political scenarios remain nebulous because, according to Schürmann, politics has always been archic, has always been configured around an *archē*. Not even what he calls the “anarchism of power,” in which he also includes Marcuse, is an exception. Here, however, looms an impasse against which Schürmann struggles without making any headway. If, in fact, political anarchy can only be reconsidered in the light of ontological anarchy, the reverse is also true, and ontological anarchy cannot but be translated into political anarchy.

A similar difficulty reappears in other philosophers who contribute to the anarchic deconstruction of every archism. How can we not mention Derrida? His words in an interview are emblematic: “I am not an anarchist. [...] Deconstruction is undoubtedly anarchic; it would be

in principle, if such a thing could be said. It puts into question the *archē*, the beginning and the commandment.”

In short: sharing an anarchic ontology is not yet the same thing as being anarchist. But the question cannot be closed abruptly by an ostentatious disavowal of all constraints. The relationship between philosophy and anarchism, which seems almost like a missed encounter, is much more ambiguous and complex than what, at first glance, one might suppose.

It is in the name of anarchy that anarchism is criticized. It is a question of letting emerge the betrayal of anarchy, whether by being enclosed in an archic principle, starting with that of order as proposed by Proudhon, or by being consigned, in specular play, to the formless disorder of explosion. This is the internal contradiction of an anarchism that does not question its own principles. Levinas used a provocative phrase; in fact he used it twice, to drive the point home: “Anarchy does not *reign*.” And again: “Anarchy cannot be sovereign, like an *archē*.”

Philosophy pushes anarchism, in a sort of almost critical self-analysis, to recover its own repressed anarchic ontology. The political repercussions are profound. It will no longer be possible to replace one sovereignty with another, nor to understand power in a Manichaean way. Old mistakes, costly ones, return to memory.

Can we really believe that the anarchic deconstruction of anarchism does not have anything to do with this tradition? A denial comes from the references to those great events that have marked the history of the anarchist movement: from the Paris Commune of 1871 to the Catalonia in 1936. As if in these events an anarchic politics was already concretized, eluding the theories of the time and their archic schemes. Explicit references recur not by chance in the exponents of more recent philosophy that has developed the thought of the “political”: from Claude Lefort to Cornelius Castoriadis, from Miguel Abensour to Jacques Rancière. The common thread that unites them despite their differences is a critique of the *archē* understood both as a philosophical principle and as a political command.

Perhaps the time has come for a new anarchism that works on the limit concepts and conceptual limits of a sclerotic legacy, one that brings to light the petrified and repressed anarchy and, preserving the privative alpha that denies and opposes established principle, that also looks beyond the frontiers of archic sovereignty and political architecture.

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The following text was first delivered as a talk during Anarchē, a two-day conference curated by the Institute for Cultural Inquiry in Berlin. Here Italian philosopher Donatella Di Cesare explores the possibility of releasing the anarchic ontology concealed within the anarchist tradition.

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