What Is the Future for Post-Structuralist Anarchism?

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Abstract

In this paper, I use insights from post-structuralist anarchism to consider the relationship between a sense of the future, or "futurity", and the notion of utopia for anarchist movements. At issue is whether anarchism requires a vision or sense of the future at all and, if so, whether that futurity should be utopian. Drawing from the post-structuralist anarchism of Todd May, Saul Newman, and Lewis Call, I consider the problems with utopia, as well as the potential irrelevance or impossibility of even thinking the future. I then argue for the necessity of both and contend that post-structuralist anarchism does not preclude either futurity or provisional forms of utopia. I conclude by sketching the outlines of a utopia that would be acceptably post-structuralist and acceptably anarchist.

Keywords: anarchism; post-structuralism; utopia; futurity

1. Introduction

Does anarchism require a sense of the future? I do not ask whether anarchism needs a future or whether it will have one. I take it that some future will come for anarchism, as for every other way of thinking and acting. Rather, I ask if anarchism and anarchists require a sense of the future. I call this sense, the engagement with it, and the development of it, "futurity". Does anarchism require futurity? Do anarchists need an idea of how the future will come and how it will go? If so, should anarchists engage with utopia and with utopian visions, or is utopia only a liability for anarchism?

One might feel that it is absurd even to suggest that anarchism forgo futurity. Anarchism has always been a future-oriented ideology. It has always stressed that the future could be better than the present, that it will be better—that it ought to be, and that it *must* be. Yet, anarchists have just as commonly emphasized that the present could be improved. That is, anarchists can often be found arguing that we need not wait until tomorrow; there is so much that can be done *today* to make our lives happier, freer, more equal, and more just. Why sigh about tomorrow when we are alive today? Why even think about tomorrow? This ambivalence is nicely contained in the anarchist insistence on "prefigurative politics"—the denial that ends justify means and instead the insistence that means must bring about ends: we must live and organize and relate to one another *today* the way we wish to live *tomorrow*. The world of tomorrow must be brought to today. Yet, is this stance an engagement with the present, with the future, or with both?

Utopia, too, is not beyond question. For many, utopias are at best naïve and at worst nightmarish. Those who find utopian dreaming to be naïve will argue that human beings are messy, contentious animals and that we will never live in a cartoon. They might argue, along Marxist lines, that economic, political, and social developments follow historically recognizable patterns and that these patterns cannot be imagined-away. Alternatively, citing Rousseau, they might simply argue that we must be realistic, and take "men as they are, and laws as they might be". Those who find a nightmare in every utopia will point to the finality and universality of these pictures: a utopia is a still life, one that applies to everyone whether they might like it or not, in which even the ability to think otherwise has been eliminated. Seen from this vantage, there are no true utopias, only dystopias.

In this paper, I use insights from a recent movement in anarchist theory, post-structuralist anarchism[(1)], to consider the relationship between a sense of the future, or "futurity", and the notion of utopia for anarchist movements. At issue is whether anarchism requires a vision or sense of the future at all and, if so, whether that futurity should be utopian. Drawing from the post-structuralist anarchism of Todd May, Saul Newman, and Lewis Call, I consider the dangers that visions of utopia carry as well as the potential irrelevance or even impossibility of thinking the future. I then argue for the necessity of futurity and utopia and contend that post-structuralist anarchism provides both warnings and guidelines for an engagement with futurity and for provisional forms of utopia. I conclude by considering the outlines of a utopia that would be acceptably post-structuralist and acceptably anarchist.

This paper has five sections. In Section 2, following this introduction, I give an overview of post-structuralist anarchism and consider positive statements by post-structuralist anarchists toward both futurity and utopia. The post-structuralist anarchists by no means explicitly reject either concept. However, these same thinkers furnish obstacles to thinking the future, and it is in Section 3 that I consider reasons for doubting both futurity and utopia. While the post-structuralist anarchist ambiguity toward futurity and utopia is perhaps philosophically appropriate, it is also potentially paralyzing. Yet, in Section 4, I argue that this ambiguity is really a productive tension. I contend that anarchists need both futurity and utopia and that post-structuralist anarchists themselves in fact provide some guidelines for both. In Section 5, I consider what an acceptable utopian vision must look like, given the productive strictures that both post-structuralism and anarchism place upon our imaginations.

2. Post-Structuralist Anarchism and the Utopian Gesture

In this Section, I give a brief account of post-structuralist anarchism and its major positions. I then consider post-structuralist anarchist gestures toward futurity and utopia. The decade after the 1999 WTO protests in Seattle was a "New Anarchist" decade [1] (pp. 1–3). This moniker, first appearing in the title of a 2002 essay by David Graeber for the *New Left Review* quickly became a popular designation for the forms of activism then flourishing [1] (p. 3).[(2)] These "new" anarchisms were distinguished from "older" ones in their broader set of references, their open,

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[(1)] Those who write on post-structuralist anarchism must typically play the "Name Game", and consider its most apt moniker. Todd May, who is more concerned with the theoretical possibilities of an anarchist/post-structuralist merger, titles this stance, appropriately, *poststructuralist anarchism*. (May does not, in his book, hyphenate "post-structuralism"). Lewis Call believes that this name is needlessly narrow: given his engagement with the work of the post-structuralists but also with thinkers such as Nietzsche, Durkheim, Freud, and Judith Butler and even with the authors of cyberpunk fiction, Call feels that *postmodern anarchism* is the best descriptor for the matrix he weaves. Newman, meanwhile, hoping to draw parallels with the post-Marxism of Ernest Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, and (in From Bakunin to Lacan at least) to elaborate a position that would transcend the limitations of both anarchism and post-structuralism, chooses *postanarchism* for his approach. Newman's name for this field has been the most controversial, as many, including May, object to Newman's implication that anarchism is outdated; nonetheless, in spite of the controversy (or perhaps because of it), *postanarchism* has been the most popular name. I have chosen to use the term "post-structuralist anarchism" in this paper both because May's theory was my first introduction to this topic and because, like May, my concerns—at least in this paper—are more theoretical or academic. I have chosen to hyphenate "post-structuralism" both for ease of reading and to emphasize the temporal nature of this movement in philosophy. For more on this "Name Game", see [1] (pp. 9–10).

[(2)] While the term appears in the title of Graeber's work, he did not coin it, and he did not seem enthused by its use. See note 3 in Evren's "Introduction" for more on the term and its relation to Graeber. For the article itself, see [8].

experimental spirit, and their greater concern with horizontal, non-oppressive modes of organization than with strict adherence to a received revolutionary doctrine [1] (pp. 3–4). Among these new anarchisms was "post-structuralist anarchism", a mostly textual and theoretical rethinking of 19th and 20th century anarchism and of the so-called "classical anarchists",[3] through the lens of French post-structuralist theories. While post-structuralist anarchism was not the only new approach to anarchism at that time, academic discussions and commentaries cemented it as the most prominent and most controversial of these new anarchisms [1] (p. 4).[4]

Accounts of post-structuralist anarchism typically begin with Todd May and his 1994 publication, *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism*.[5] May's was the first book-length exploration of a possible interaction between post-structuralism and anarchism;[6] this was followed in 2001 by Saul Newman's *From Bakunin to Lacan: Anti-Authoritarianism and the Dislocation of Power* and then in 2002 by Lewis Call's *Postmodern Anarchism*. Especially after Newman's work, commentaries, reactions, and critical assessments of this new approach began to grow in number, as did contributions from thinkers other than May, Newman, and Call.[7] Today, well over twenty years after the WTO protests in Seattle and after other momentous events, like Occupy Wall Street, the Arab Spring, and the Black Lives Matter protests, it is difficult to perform scholarly work on anarchism without taking post-structuralist anarchism into account.

Given that they draw from the same two traditions, it is not surprising that the post-structuralist anarchists endorse similar positions. From the anarchists, they take a skepticism toward hierarchy, domination, and power-over others—especially when these relations hypostatize into inescapable frameworks, such as statism, capitalism, patriarchy, and other such macro-systems. They also endorse the anarchist openness to experimentation and to developing horizontal and fluid forms of inter-relation. From the post-structuralist philosophers (such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, and Jean-François Lyotard), they take even more: a rejection of essentialism, of meta- narratives, and of political and even epistemological representationism; the assertion that both power and resistance are dispersed throughout society's practices and discourses; a general view of power that holds it to be productive or generative, rather than repressive; a belief that subjects and their subjectivities are constituted, flexible, fluid, and fragmented; an opposition to simple, binary thinking; an elaboration of a loose ethics that aligns with post-structuralism's skittishness towards norms and normativity; and an opposition to domination and oppression.

Crucially, despite their opposition to binary oppositions, the post-structuralist anarchists tend to read anarchist theory through the light of post-structuralism—it is usually *post-structuralist* ideas that are held up as the standard that anarchists past and present either meet or fail to achieve. That it is the *anarchists* who might have more nuanced, accurate, or even useful ideas than the post-structuralists is rarely seriously entertained.

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[3] This is a contentious term; it is typically meant to pick out the anarchists of the 19th century, such as Mikhail Bakunin and Pyotr Kropotkin, but is occasionally used to cover early 20th century anarchists, like Alexander Berkman and Emma Goldman. For more on this term, see [1].

[4] For a singularly disgruntled analysis of the other "new" anarchisms, see [9].

[5] May's first published work on post-structuralist anarchism was his 1989 article "Is Post-Structuralist Political Theory Anarchist?" which appeared in volume 15, number 2 of *Philosophy and Social Criticism*. For the article, see [10].

[6] That same year, Andrew Koch also published one of the first examinations of post-structuralism and anarchism. See [11].

[7] Accounts of the origins of post-structuralist anarchism are, however, quite varied. See [1] (pp. 6–7).

In subsequent sections, I will use the ideas of the post-structuralist anarchists to raise doubts about futurity and utopia and whether anarchists need to even engage with either. These thinkers challenge us to acknowledge the danger of utopian impulses, and perhaps more radically, their ideas suggest that futurity is unnecessary or irrelevant for radical politics. Nonetheless, I wish to note here that I do not believe that May, Newman, or Call really intends to deny either futurity or utopia. Although each gives reason to suspect futurity and utopia, they also give us reasons to engage with both.

For example, regarding futurity, Lewis Call devotes an entire chapter of his book *Postmodern Anarchism* to cyberpunk fiction, whose *raison d'être* is to imagine a future. That these imagined futures are often bleak is of no concern: what matters is the ability to even imagine a future apart from our present. The characters in these novels, though they usually face grim circumstances, live praiseworthy lives in ways that embody the most radical and liberatory elements of both anarchism and post-structuralism. It is in the context of imagined futures that readers are encouraged to think and live differently, today.

In a more general sense, the writers of post-structuralist anarchism engage with futurity in the very writing of their books. In any work of philosophy, there is a paradoxically unspoken enunciation, one that runs like a current underneath all that is written: *believe me; think this way; act on these ideas*. Writing philosophy is always in some way hortatory. And a piece of writing is always both within a specific time and outside of that time. When we write something, in our present(s), we also and thereby make words and ideas stick around longer than they would have, had our practice been simply locutionary. Writing sends ideas far into the future. In the act of writing books, the content of which the authors hope will be understood and lived in some other time than the time of writing, the post-structuralist anarchists engage in a "futural" enterprise.

With regard to utopia, it is clear that for many radical dreamers, utopia has a forceful, even inescapable quality. The post-structuralist anarchists acknowledge these facts. Newman, for instance, writes "There is no problem with utopian imaginaries, and, indeed, a certain utopian impulse is central to all radical politics in the sense that it punctures the limits of our current reality" [2] (pp. 12–13). Seen from this point of view, an engagement with utopia (and, lexically, futurity) is simply unavoidable.

Yet, we need not merely resign ourselves to futurity or utopia. We can in fact look at both as positive tools. Call, for example, writes favorably of utopia. For instance, he suggests that we may even need to restore our sense of utopia in order to counter the neoliberal dystopia unfolding before us [2] (pp. 23–24). Further, he claims that his postmodern anarchism "stands as a utopian thought" [3]. Although Call writes that postmodern anarchism, "is not about defining the specific destinations of revolutionary thought and action", but rather seeks "to chart a new terrain", this does not preclude him from speaking in a general way about this future world [3]. He writes "[w]hile the specific details of this terrain are not yet fully apparent, we can already say a good deal about it". This future is symbolic (not semiotic), its inhabitants are nomadic, there are customs but no laws, and reason, morality, and consciousness itself are open, rather than closed [3]. Call further challenges his readers to imagine a different world, writing

> A utopian anarchist of the postmodern sort dedicates her life to the pursuit of an agenda which, to be frank, seems far-fetched only because the engines of the spectacular-commodity economy are relentless in their insistence that we cannot have these things. Is it actually so outrageous to imagine a time other than that of

the office cubicle and the television schedule, or a space which is different from the suburban wasteland with its tract houses, freeways, and shopping malls? Is it so preposterous to put forward a definition of subjectivity which cannot be boiled down to such essentialist semiotic categories as the factory worker, the consumer, the Third World peasant? Is it, in short, so entirely unspeakable that we should demand of our cultural and political systems the right to define who and what we are, the right to change that definition at a moment's notice, and the right to articulate visions of time and space which will be suitable to our newly constructed selves?

Call concludes simply, "It is not" [3].

Thus, there is a place for futurity and utopia in anarchist theory and even in the skeptical discourse of post-structuralist anarchism. Yet, as I show in the next section, there is also considerable room to doubt both, and the "place" for futurity and utopia within post-structuralist anarchism is an unsteady one. The acknowledgment of futurity and utopia in post-structuralist anarchist texts is largely gestural and sometimes not even gestural, but only implied. Post-structuralist anarchists are hesitant to provide positive resources for thinking the future, and they regard the desire to build mental utopias as akin to playing with dynamite. If post-structuralist anarchists provide an outline for how to think the future and what the visions of that future ought to look like, this outline is mostly a negative one. It is mostly by foreclosing problematic routes forward that post-structuralist anarchists generate a futurity and a utopia, the name of which they will not speak.

3. Futurity and Utopia: A Critique

In this section, I propose an anarchist heresy: that utopia, and the future itself, are unimportant for anarchism—indeed, that they are even dangerous concepts. To do so, I investigate two central orientations in post-structuralist anarchist texts—anti-essentialism, and anti-representationism. Although these stances are useful interventions into philosophy, generally, and into political philosophy, specifically, they have the perhaps unintended consequence of radically calling into question the feasibility of utopia and the necessity of futurity, for both futurity and utopia seem, at first glance, to rely upon essence and representation. If anarchism is to jettison these ideas, then we must ask whether there is room, any longer, for any sense of the future, and any "city on a hill".

The most important quality of post-structuralist anarchism has been its renunciation of essentialism and of any meta-narratives that rely on it. Essentialism is defined by Newman as "the idea that beneath surface differences, there lies one true identity or character" [4] (p. 13). Newman, May, and Call find the idea of an essence to be theoretically suspect and politically harmful. Following Foucault and Deleuze, May remarks that "essence" should not be seen as a metaphysical given, but simply an idea, a political project that has been undertaken [5] (pp. 79–80), something that has emerged from historical and political circumstances. Against a timeless essence, May raises the notion of timely "emergence". Citing Foucault (who in turn cites Nietzsche), May uses the term *Entstehung* to capture the idea that even a seemingly unitary object (an idea, a person, a society), one that *appears* to have a singular and self-same nature, is really neither a stable ontological unit nor the final and finished product of a linear historical development. Instead, every

particular thing is a contingent happening that has not only emerged through a connection of separate productions, but that also lacks any final goal or *telos* [5] (p. 91).

In addition to offering these theoretical objections, post-structuralist anarchism emphasizes the political dangers of essentialist thinking. Once one has established an unquestionable essence for humankind, one has the ability, oneself, to decide what is appropriate or not for human beings. Newman writes, "Not only does essentialist thinking limit the individual to certain prescribed norms of morality and behavior, it also excludes identities and modes of behavior which do not conform to these norms" [4] (p. 3). He continues, "The logic of essentialism produces an oppositional thinking, from which binary hierarchies are constructed: normal/abnormal, sane/insane, hetero-homosexual, etc." [4]. At its worst, this sort of thinking can debase actual living individuals before mere abstractions they are meant to live up to [4] (p. 58).

Not only is the concept of an individual's having a deeper human nature scrapped, the idea of "Man" as an overarching signifier is also jettisoned, despite its place as the dominant figure in modern scientific, medical, sociological, and political discourses [4] (pp. 85–86). "Society" too can no longer be imagined as a cohesive whole with a substantial character. May writes that it is mistaken to view society spatially, as in the "social space", for there is no singular medium that contains power-relations [5] (pp. 53–54). On the contrary, society is constituted by political and social relationships [5]—it is a network, and not a closed holism; it is a lattice, and not a gel. And it has no nature [5] (p. 85). Rather than grand, top-down studies of a fictional social total, then, all serious analyses and interventions must occur on the local level.

Power is also de-essentialized in the post-structuralist anarchist approach: it has no unitary quality, and it is not located in a single domain, such as the laws of economics (as Marxists would claim) or in the hierarchical oppression of (admittedly various) institutions (as the "classical" anarchists are alleged to have believed).[8] Power is merely the relationship between forces [4] (pp. 80–81). As a correlate, resistance can no longer be seen as having an essence either: it is not located in the nature of human beings (either in the particular individual or in an aggregate "humanity"), since human beings have no nature.[9]

If society, power, and resistance no longer have basic natures, then revolution as hitherto conceptualized is no longer coherent. We cannot take revolution to be a change from one uniform kind of society to another, as if a light-switch has been flipped [5] (p. 54); no single society is cohesive enough to be simply swapped out for another, no singular power source can be identified and dismantled (or seized), and no single sort of resistance could possibly do the job—*there is no single job to be done.* As Call notes, rather than a single apocalyptic revolution, the task is to engage in a "tactical collection of microrevolts" whose cumulative effects will produce the desired change [3] (pp. 75–76). Revolution in the all-or-nothing sense is a *meta-narrative*: a fairy-tale of liberation, from a condition of servitude to one of freedom and full humanity [2] (pp. 6–7).

Besides an anti-essentialism, post-structuralist anarchism is also characterized by an anti-representationism. Like the anarchists, May, Call, and Newman share a rejection of representation, though they have different reasons for this disavowal. Here, we must distinguish between two sorts of representation: *Vertretung* and *Vorstellung*. The former, *Vertretung*, refers to the sort

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[8] For more on how "classical" anarchists allegedly reconstitute the unity of power on a higher, abstract level than did the Marxists, see [12] (pp. 78–81). As a counter-example, readers are encouraged to consult the writings of Gustav Landauer in [13], in particular the essay titled "Revoltion".

[9] Newman does not believe the "classical" anarchists alone were guilty of essentializing resistance–the post-structuralists, too, in different ways, ultimately make this mistake. See [4] (p. 120).

of representation that occurs in explicitly political contexts; it is the act of speaking for another person (either with that person's consent or without it). *Vorstellung* is the act of re-presenting something; it is the creation of an image, the presenting of something not present. According to many philosophies, when we speak, think, paint, or write, we always engage in this broader sort of representation.

May notes that representationism is objectionable on both epistemological and political levels [5] (p. 97), but the problem is mostly due to *Vorstellung*. On an epistemological level, representation is simply false. Humans have no nature that they had better live up to, one that can be explained to them by others. There is nothing there to be re-presented, or made present again. Yet, politically too, this sort of stance can be dangerous [5]. It allows some to rule over others: it is by representing people to themselves—by telling their audiences that they know who their listeners *truly* are, and what they *truly* want—that those who seek to influence can manipulate others. Even more, representative discourses, like humanism, encourage people to damage themselves. Discussing the early Lyotard, May notes how representation introduces a "negativity of absence" into relations: given that a representation is always a stand-in for something else that is *not* there, the absent object grows to dominate the discourse of representation. When an individual attempts self-representation, they introduce an absence—the individual's "true self", "core", or "nature"—and there emerges a difference between the representer as they are and what is represented (namely, the representer's idealized picture of themselves). In other words, when we try to grasp our essence, we fail, since there is no such thing there. In the process, we warp what actually is there: ourselves [5] (pp. 80–84). So then, while the theorists of post-structruralist anarchism believe that *Vertretung* is dangerous, it is problematic precisely because it is too much invested in insidious forms of *Vorstellung*.

What sort of picture emerges from these points? Seen from this vantage, the task for anarchists is to focus on tactical, micro-political resistances. Rather than imagine that we could ever topple the government, smash capitalism, or "free" "Mankind", we must zero-in on the particular forms of domination that we see around us, expose those forms of oppression, and strive to arrive at power-relations that are not so harmful. That much is clear. However, there is another implication that is less clear. By disabusing their readers of fantastical, poorly-founded ideas, the post-structuralist anarchists are also taking their readers out of an implicit, imaginary future-time, and re-placing them into the real, explicit present. The unspoken message is forget the future.

After all, resistance, like power, is localized not only in space, but also in time. What is happening here is happening *here*; what is happening now is happening *now*. If it is problematic to imagine power as "over there"—over there in Washington, on Wall Street, or in transcendent economic laws, or in the hierarchies of various institutions, then it is equally problematic to imagine a "When" that is removed from this one, a time when we will supposedly be free from these forms of oppression. Simplified ideas about power (that it has a unitary nature, or a unitary place) and simplified ideas of society (that it has an essence, that this essence can be changed all at once) give rise to simplified ideas about revolution—that it will consist of a single, qualitative change.

In place of a problematic future—unitary, impersonal, and always on the horizon—we have the present, the here and now, wherever that here and now happen to be for the reader. Alternatively, to be more precise, we have a *multiplicity of presents*, each irreducible to the other. These presents consist of nothing more than the power-relations—that is, the practices—of the people involved. These practices must be understood in their specificity. Yet, they must also be

understood genealogically, as the result of the sedimentation of various other practices. If these practices are oppressive, then the resistances to them must not occur in some other place, or in some other time, but presently. We can rely on neither meta-narratives, nor essentialist categories, to ground our acts of resistance. And the future is just such a meta-narrative. It is a signifier without any signified.

Very simply, futurity has been radically called into question. And utopia has been given an even grimmer diagnosis. At base, utopianism also appears to be representationist.

Call, for instance, in his treatment of Habermas, gives utopists reason to worry. Call is compelled to reject what he sees as Habermas's homogenizing "communicative rationality", in favor of tactical, local, micro-reasons. According to Call, Habermas's suggestion for social interaction is that we lean on a subject-centered reason, one that is procedural and that allows for consensus-building. But, stresses Call, this form of rationality does not exist and cannot exist on a large scale—say, at the level of millions of communities. For Call, large-scale consensus means exclusion and the suppression of dissenting voices [3] (p. 39). Call's rejection ought to worry utopists, for the kind of consensus-seeking stance that is attributed to Habermas—one built from multiple particular yet similar subjectivities—closely resembles the practical outlook that anarchists champion when describing how diverse persons will work together in an anarchist society. How can a utopia flourish if the very possibility for agreement is limited to small groups of people?

Following Nietzsche, Call also takes "the spirit of gravity" to be a threat to contemporary activists; the spirit of gravity is a kind of societal entropy that smothers innovation and change—exactly the sort of danger an inherited utopianism poses. The spirit of gravity might turn any utopia sour.[10] Along with Foucault, Call presents the problems with placing oneself in a "We". These problems are the problems of any universalized vision—they are the problems of any dream of a society that attempts to be whole and self-referential. Namely, such visions close off debate before they even begin. Universal consensus is *dangerous*, whether that consensus be in a liberal republic or an anarchist utopia.

Newman too presents many roadblocks on the way to utopia. In discussing Derrida, he notes that the undecideability at the root of all judgments has implications for political discourses, such as the institution of law. Law is, in a certain way, illegitimate, and the establishment of law is violence [4] (p. 127). This is good news for presentist anarchists, those concerned with the laws of today. But what of the "rules" of an anarchist utopia or even simply an anarchist society? What about the customs and "social regularities" of an anarchist community? Are these customs illegitimate or violent in the same way as law? And what of the utopian dream—the coherent, if still hazy vision of the world we must build? Is a utopian vision similarly illegitimate? Newman is scathing towards those political philosophies he thinks try to "fill" the Lacanian lack in society that constitutes society's (temporary) identity in the first place: these political dreams are always hegemonic and nightmarish [4] (p. 148). Are anarchist utopias not guilty of this same maneuver?

Newman also has his own problems with Habermas, and, like Call, Newman's qualms bleed into the general problems with utopia. According to Newman, Habermas's theories try to repress the *chargedness* of society: its roiling, boiling quality. The attempt to banish constraint and power, as supposedly negative phenomena, from an idealized rational communication only ensures their presence and in their most harmful forms: *arbitrary* constraint, and power-*over* others. Newman

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[10] This is precisely the malaise that has affected the anarchist society on the fictional planet of Anarres in Ursula K. Le Guin's celebrated novel *The Disposessed*. See [14].

is firm: there can be no universal moral ground. If this is so, then our cherished ideas of a utopia in which all problems have been resolved is a pernicious lie—a lie that we have told to ourselves.

Newman is insistent that there be no predetermined goals or logics for anarchism. There must be no specific program for organization or action—anarchism must be a method for this moment and not a revolutionary project or political program [2] (pp. 12–13).[11] Even when he is discussing prefiguration, Newman emphasizes the present over the future. Anarchism's insistence on prefigurative politics, he writes, "has made anarchism perhaps the most ethical of all the radical political traditions" [2]. While this definition might give readers interested in futurity some hope, Newman ties prefigurative politics to the Stirnerite notion of the individual person's insurrection and gives two implications, or principles, of contemporary insurrectionist prefiguration. "Firstly, there is the idea … that the insurrection takes place in the immediacy of the present, in the here and now, without being determined by a particular future end or *telos*" [2] (p. 65). That is, future arrangements that arise from the insurrection of this moment are to be understood as contingent and changeable. "Secondly, prefigurative practices should be regarded as […] elaborations of ethical practices and a constant work on oneself in order to invent subjectivities and relationships which are self-governing and no longer enthralled to power" [2]. In other words, each individual must launch an ongoing revolution in their own lives, so that they might develop new ways of seeing themselves and relating to others in a non-dominating way.

What is striking here is the first principle of insurrection, particularly that there be no *telos* to an insurrection. Traditionally *telos* has carried determinist connotations and has implied a future that is already finished and waiting, hanging before us in some potential non-place and non-time. Yet here, Newman uses *telos* merely as a synonym for any future aspiration or goal [2]. Newman is concerned that our activities in the present not be based on "some pre-ordained ideal or image of society but on the desires of the singularities who comprise it" [2] (p. 66). That this is a major blow to utopia, and to futurity itself, is unspoken.

Our hopes for tomorrow and our rosy pictures about what tomorrow might look like appear trampled. We see that anarchism has ample reason to conclude that utopia and the future no longer make sense for us anymore. Yet, despite this gloominess, in the next section, I argue that they still do.

4. From Ambivalence to Productive Tension

In this section, I argue that although both futurity and utopia carry difficulties, it is also dangerous simply to dismiss them. Rather, I hold that given their inevitable and even useful qualities, our task is not to get away from them, but to engage them in the right way. As such, the ambivalence toward futurity and utopia shown by the post-structuralist anarchists must be rethought as a productive tension: an opportunity to think futurity and utopia in new ways.

The basic post-structuralist anarchist views are as follows: power is dispersed [5] (pp. 52–54); resistance is also dispersed [5] (pp. 52–54); both are localized—in space and in time [5] (pp. 53–54, 85). Power-relations, and the practices to which they are tied, have complex, non-unitary origins [5] (p. 91). These origins constitute, but do not totally determine, what follows from them

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[11] Newman does not want to read today's actions (or the struggles of yesteryear) as successes or failures based in terms of their relation to some hypothetical Revolution-to-Come. He feels this is unfair to those who have come before us and unproductive for those living today. For a similar view, see [15].

[5] (pp. 98–101). Macro-systems, such as capitalism or statism emerge, at least initially, from the sedimentation of local practices, but neither macro-systems nor local practices are totally beholden to the other [4] (p. 14), [5] (pp. 98–101). Essences do not exist [4] (pp. 50–51, 60, 67, 80, 119–120, 139–141, 147, 149, 163). Society has no essence [4] (pp. 147, 149, 163). Revolution as theorized hitherto is false: society cannot be changed all at once or entirely switched out for another kind of society [5] (pp. 54–55). Revolution is a matter of a number of quantitative changes [5]. There is no simple, singular, "qualitative change" in a revolution [5]. A singular, qualitative revolution is a type of meta-narrative [5]. Meta-narratives rely on essences and are not only philosophically dubious, but politically harmful [3] (pp. 13–15).

These stances and their underlying insistence on anti-essentialism and anti-representationism are necessary interventions into political theory. However, an over-emphasis on these points can lead to an unhelpful nominalism—an ecstasy of irreducibility—that stands to jeopardize the effectiveness of anarchism as a cooperatively social, economic, and political orientation. Paralysis is not radical.

While skepticism is warranted, there are moments when it is taken out of hand. In these cases, all universals—even those understood non-metaphysically as "floating signifiers"[12]—are either denied or threatened. This jeopardizes not only our ability to act in and on society, but even to speak or to think. The issue of post-structuralist anarchism's nominalism will pose serious risks to its own ability to imagine any future, let alone a utopian one. Unfortunately, the post-structuralists and even some anarchists, in developing such a strong critique of representation, endanger our ability to engage in *Vorstellung* at all; they challenge our ability to re-present ideas to one another or even to represent concepts to *ourselves*. If it is really a crime to represent "the way of things" to other people, then each of us will be trapped in our own experiences—on this view, attempting to communicate them with others risks dominating the other or being dominated. Yet, this is just the sort of work that analyzing the present or imagining a future entails: communicating how things stand, and what we ought to want. Such an emphasis on anti-representation risks our being incapable of dreaming or planning not only *together*, but even alone: for who are we to hold a future version of ourselves hostage to the desires of some former self?[13]

Newman believes that the task of post-structuralist anarchism is to provide an open horizon for political thought and action, but that it is precisely not "to establish a new hegemony over this open horizon" [2] (p. 138). We must wonder though, if sketching a possible future is really equivalent to establishing a hegemony over it. If so, then our projects—including those motivated by post-structuralist anarchism itself—must of necessity be limited to a series of unconnected presents. Before that hasty conclusion, we might consider whether there is really no hope for the future.

Call appears as if he will avoid this trap: early in *Postmodern Anarchism*, he writes that post-modernism has fetishized difference and irreducibility to such an extent that it risks fragmen-

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[12] This is an alternative to the term "empty signifier". The idea of an "empty signifier" was first articulated by Newman's mentor, Ernesto Laclau. An empty signifier is a signifier not dependent on any fixed or stable signified. Newman suggests we make rationality and morality into empty signifiers, for, as he notes, "Without any notion of morality and rationality it is impossible to develop a critique of authority". See [4] (p. 164). This new way of conceptualizing these terms would not rely on any transcendent subjectivity that could be used to exclude or dominate others. See [4] (p. 163).

[13] Indeed, both William Godwin and Max Stirner were puzzled at why anyone should be held accountable to

tation, incoherence, and mutual antagonism [3] (p. 13). Later on, however, he expounds upon Deleuze and Guatari's "becoming minoritarian", a method for crafting a micropolitics and avoiding suspect macropolitics. Much of this is right in line with Newman's "singularist" politics and, again, the emphasis here is on one's duty to oneself. Call sounds as if he believes that one redesigns oneself *by oneself*. Yet, our subjectivity is bound to practices and discourses that are social: one cannot be anything alone [3] (pp. 51–52).

I believe it is possible to arrive at an argument on behalf of utopias, rather than an injunction against them, from out of post-structuralist anarchism itself. Theorists of an anarchism that is also post-structuralist stress that our analyses of the world should begin with *practices*, which are understood to be "goal-directed social regularities" [5] (pp. 87–88). These thinkers point out that power is inevitable, but that domination is not—certain power-relations allow for greater possibilities for freedom than do others [4] (pp. 79–80, 90). The post-structuralist anarchists allow for generalist ethics and for ethical limitations and, moreover, advise that there is nothing authoritarian in the idea of an ethical limit, despite a limitation's being precisely an injunction against something. Indeed, authors of post- structuralist anarchism argue that the most useful ethical limits are generated not from authoritarian but from anti-authoritarian discourse itself: they insist that we cannot sanction forms of living that reinforce arbitrary authority [4] (p. 160).

Like both anarchists and post-structuralists before them, these thinkers know that the enlightenment ideals must not simply be abandoned. While notions of "rationality", "universality", and "rights" pose incredible dangers, these dangers can be recognized and neutralized or else mitigated by reworking the very ideas rather than discarding them [4] (p. 129). To mitigate and rework problematic ideas, one can make of them "empty" or "floating" signifiers. Thus, following Ernesto Laclau, one may rethink terms, like "rationality" and "morality", as signifiers not linked to any fixed or final signified. In this way, these terms retain their usefulness without their ability to dominate on the basis of fantasies or on the basis of non-present, yet somehow "more real", phenomena [4] (p. 163).

Beyond rationality and morality, "the subject", too, can be retained as a non-essentialized concept [4] (p. 122), even as we refrain from founding our projects on any totality, such as 'The People' or 'Humanity' [4] (pp. 152–153). "Society", too, can be refashioned as a more useful notion, as an expanding and contracting network of persons, practices, and institutions [4] (p. 153). Even "revolution" can be rethought: if power-relations can accumulate into macro- systems, there is no reason to believe that micro-resistances cannot themselves accumulate into a macro-resistance [4] (p. 79).

In the next section, I hold that "utopia" itself must be remade into a "floating signifier". This is neither to posit a singular "content-full" program nor to remove all content from our utopian visions. Surely, there can no longer be a unitary signified—"The Utopia"—which all must acknowledge. Yet, we must assert our *provisional* utopias and the very *possibility* of these temporary visions, against an alarming deadening of the sense that there could be any tomorrow worth living into.

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promises made in the past. See [16] (pp. 87–94). See also [17] (p. 210).

5. So, Is It Important to Dream?[14] The Case for Utopia

In this section, I sketch the outlines, not of a particular utopia, but rather the form of a utopia that would be acceptably anarchist and acceptably post-structuralist.

What is a utopia?[15] As Chiara Bottici has noted, there are two senses of the word utopia. In the general sense, a utopia "describes a positive, yet unrealizable, state", while in the more restricted sense, utopias are features of a literary and political genre of writing "devoted to the construction of models of the perfect society" [6] (p. 1732). Although the word utopia owes its origins to the title of Thomas More's eponymous work, literary examples of this sort of idea date back at least to Plato's *Republic* [6] (pp. 1732, 1734).

Bottici, following Karl Manheim, stresses that utopias and utopian thinking must be contrasted with "ideologies". While the former are revolutionary, in that they "break the bonds" of the existing social order and work against the status quo, the latter, she argues, are conservative, as they seek to preserve the way things are [6] (p. 1732).[16],[17] Indeed, any piece of writing, even one that does not describe a utopia in great detail, can be considered to have "utopian elements", so long as it "expresses the belief that some (or all) social evils can be eliminated and a good place created" [6] (p. 1733). Even "negative utopias", or dystopias—such as those described in George Orwell's *1984* or Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*—carry with them revolutionary potential. Though they describe nightmarish realities, they serve as a "guiding ideal for human conduct" [6] (p. 1733); that is, they are "programs for the reforms of the present" [7] (p. 198). Thus, utopias and utopian thinking have a "regulative function"—they "measure the good and bad that existing societies contain" and carry with them the conviction that "the current state of affairs is modifiable" [6] (pp. 1733–1734). It is this regulative function that Bottici identifies as one of the most important traits of utopias.

Utopias, of course, have their critics, even outside of the theorists of post-structuralist anarchism. Karl Popper, for instance, criticizes Plato, Hegel, and Marx, in their supposed utopianism, as enemies of an "open society". This sort of critique is similar to those implicitly put forward by the theorists of post-structuralist anarchism: utopias describe "closed", totalitarian forms of social organization, where every question has already been answered [6] (p. 1734).[18] In such societies, politics, perhaps even philosophy, are superfluous [6] (p. 1734).

I will not here argue whether Popper or the post-structuralist anarchists are historically correct in their assessments of utopia. Utopias have as many friends as they do critics, and there is serious scholarly concern that enemies of utopia tend to paint a one-dimensional picture of a genre and a political tool that is much more flexible, nuanced, and variable than it is made out to be. Indeed, given that post-structuralist anarchists have sometimes given inaccurate or unchar-

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[14] I take this phrase from Michel Foucault's interview, "So, Is It Important to Think?" See [18] (pp. 454–458).

[15] There is a considerable literature on the subject of utopia, towards which I can only gesture here for reasons of space. For comprehensive surveys, readers are encouraged to seek out [19–21] (in particular the afterword by Firth), [22] (in particular Part V, in which the contributors discuss post-structuralist anarchism, and in which an article by Newman appears), and [23].

[16] See also [7] (p. 197). For Manheim's theory of utopias, see [24], especially (pp. 173–184).

[17] Note that not all political theorists are as hostile to 'ideology' as is Bottici: Nathan Jun, for example, makes productive use of Michael Freeden's account of ideology for anarchist purposes. See [25] (pp. 1–38). See also [26] (pp. 1–12).

[18] For more of Popper's view, see [27].

itable readings of 19th century anarchist texts, it is likely that their positions need to be taken with a grain of historical salt.

Nonetheless, what I wish to do is, perhaps dangerously,{19{ take at face-value the philosophical criticisms of the skeptics of utopia—whether they be post-structuralist anarchists or not. Any positive form of utopia that hopes to be workable will have to meet these criticisms. It might be that these criticisms are not themselves historically well-founded objections to utopia, as such. They are, however, well-founded *philosophical* or *theoretical* objections to an idealized futurity. It is in meeting the most trenchant theoretical criticisms of an idealized futurity that I am interested.

To begin to meet these criticisms, we might first ask: what is it that we really need from a utopia? I take it that a futurity is utopian, not when it finally solves some eternal issue that has plagued Mankind since time immemorial, but simply if this imagined future world marks the following: (1) an ongoing movement (2) *away* from (3) hierarchical, dominating practices and institutions. That is the standard by which we need define our utopian futurities.

Per (1), this dream is never closed or final. Per (2), this movement is progressive and quantitative. Yet, per (3), an acceptable utopia has some ethical content, by virtue of what it opposes, and it thereby has a standard by which to measure (2). I therefore contend that any dream of human life-to-come that imagines a place and time, situated (retro-actively) in an ongoing, ethical progression away from the terrors of this world, here and now, can be read as an acceptable utopia.

Such an acceptable utopia need not be seen as "global". Global utopias, as Bottici notes, are grand visions that hope to create a society that is truly perfect, in all respects and in every way [6] (p. 1734). An acceptable anarchist utopia, on the other hand, would merely imagine a point in space and time along an asymptotic progression toward a limit that does not exist. Yet, acceptable utopias would not be "partial" either. A partial utopia, writes Bottici, is a small-scale hope, one that abandons not only finality, but the striving towards it. "Partial utopias" aim for improvements "in some limited respects only" [6]. A partial utopia acknowledges that not all social evils will be eliminated, yet maintains that some acceptable state-of-things can nonetheless be achieved. It is the suburban hopes of state capitalists, bourgeois republicans, and liberals of both a progressive and a conservative flavor that can be described as "partial utopias". The goal for these persons is always some kind of "this-is-as-good-as-it-gets" republic, one that is "good enough". Yet, the alternative utopia I describe would occupy a space between global and partial utopias: these would be "meso" or "middle" utopias; they would truly aim to describe the victory over all of the ills that are considered objectionable from the locus of their enunciation, but they would nonetheless leave open the possibility, indeed the probability, that future peoples will have their own ideas about what is unconscionable in their time. The acceptable utopia in question would thus either continue to grow and to change or else would be thrown away entirely, as the persons of the future fashion their own utopias. Acceptable utopias must therefore have a built-in shelf life.

The project of post-structuralist anarchism has been precisely not to have a single project; its project has been to have many projects, micro-projects, or *tactical* projects. May stresses that we must favor what he calls "tactical" political philosophy over "strategic" political philosophy. Tactical political philosophy is philosophy that does not conceive power to have a single location and thus does not stress a single sort of resistance. Strategic political philosophy, however, locates power in a single "place", and is thus able to sustain a single goal: to topple that power, whether it is the government, capitalism, or the church [5] (pp. 7–15). May sees an ambiguity in

"classical" anarchism: if the "founding members" of anarchism are read as laying out blueprints, then they are strategic thinkers. If, however, they are read as merely offering suggestions "for alternative arrangements for specific segments in the social network" [5] (pp. 13, 59–60), then they are tactical thinkers. This is a good point, insofar as "cookbooks for future chefs" risk becoming sclerotic, cemented, dogmatic, and reductive. However, a fear of falling into dogmatism leads post-structuralist anarchists to refrain from envisioning the future at all. Must we live, always and only, right now?

I charge that it is possible to think "tactico-strategically". A combination of both tactical political theory and its strategic counterpart is necessary for anarchism. Anarchism must be situated in the tension between two visions of action: tactical and strategic. The anarchist *strategy*, like all strategies, really is unitary: to undermine hierarchy and domination by crafting other ways of being.[19] And hierarchy and domination really do have a single location, albeit an abstract one: the power-relations that inevitably exist wherever there are people. Power-relations are in our practices, or they are nowhere. This being said, the *tactics* we must use to improve society are, of necessity, multiple, because hierarchy and oppression are multiple in form and because power-relations cannot be eliminated. Anarchism is, as May suspects, indeed partly strategic [5] (pp. 59–60), but this is not a weakness, as he claims. Anarchism calls for a better world—this is a singular task and a singular direction, but one with many avenues.

The utopian form that I sketch—an imagined society situated in an ongoing movement *away* from hierarchical, dominating practices and institutions—avoids the criticisms of post-structuralist anarchism. Post-structuralist anarchism neglects to engage in futurity and utopian dreaming because it is undignified to speak for others. It is wrong to hold others, even our later selves, hostage to grand ideas that corral individuals into a singular narrative, with singular categories and singular outcomes; it is far better to keep the future open, to focus on the now, and to attend to the forms of power that need resisting presently. Yet, utopian thinking need not *necessarily* be authoritarian. An acceptable utopia would be, self-admittedly, a potentially unreachable goal—for one never finishes uprooting domination and hierarchy. Nonetheless, an acceptable utopia would be a firm (if not concrete) vision of a better life that was explicit in its opposition to the structural forms of hierarchy and a domination characteristic of its time of pronouncement.

What makes a utopia *acceptably* utopian is not that it is our destiny and not that it is the result of the unfolding of transcendent historical laws. An acceptable utopia is neither a picture of the *only* society that really suits our "natures", nor is it be so logical that all must eventually recognize the rationality of the world it foretells. No, any acceptable utopia is utopian simply because it makes present something so much *better* than the present circumstances. Such a utopia better meets the characteristics that anarchist writers, post- structuralist writers, and post-structuralist anarchist writers have already elaborated as necessary for power-relations that are non-oppressive. This sort of utopia would retain the idea of progress, but would measure that progress against the hierarchical circumstances of where it is getting *away from*, rather than the standards of where it imagines we are going *to*. As a fallibilist fantasy, it would be perpetually open to reinterpretation or re-call. This utopia would serve as a placeholder, a carrier-bag for the billions of open practices and non-oppressive power-relations that we hope to achieve precisely because they are not like what we are facing now.

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[19] Note that our task is not to eliminate power-relations themselves—this is impossible. But it is our goal to

Our times are riddled with problematic ideas: essentialism, meta-narratives, a singu- larist and repressive view of power. It is also mired in cascades of hierarchy and hierarchical systems of organization and inter-relation: capitalism, the State, religious institutions, patri- archy, white supremacy, colonialism, heteronormativity, cisnormativity, ableism, ageism, androcentrism, and more. Acceptable utopias posit a society where *none* of these networked systems of hierarchy are present. Any imagined future network of practices that does *not* include the sort of power-relations that result in pernicious, macro-systemic hierarchies is acceptably utopian. And inso-far as that is our provisional goal, then this vision, every moment we practice it, is acceptably utopian.

In this sense, the vision of an acceptable utopia I sketch is similar to the political myths that Bottici has examined in *A Philosophy of Political Myth*. As described by Bottici, a political myth is a practice—it is "the work on a common narrative by which the members of a social group (or society) make significance of their political experiences and deeds" [7] (p. 179). She adds, "what makes a political myth out of a simple narrative is not its content or its claim to truth … but the fact that this narrative creates significance, that it is shared by a group and that it affects the specifically political conditions in which this group operates" [7]. Tellingly, she says that "significance" is always particularistic, "in the sense that what is significant for me here and now is not necessarily so in another context", but, that there is always the possibility that "what is significant for me here and now can also be recognized as significant by somebody else who shares the same conditions" [7] (p. 178). In this sense, a political myth is "not an absolute universal, but a relative one, and precisely a universal relative to the conditions in which these beings of the imagination [political myths] are created" [7]. Thus, "[p]olitical myths are always told from the standpoint of the present" [7].

Bottici notes the similarities between political myths and utopias: they both have a regulative function and both can be sites "for the work of the radical imagination" [7] (p. 198). But in Bottici's view, utopias, are not as kinetic as political myths are. On her account, utopias do not move as well as political myths do; they attempt to solve problems (in a global or partial sense) all at once, and then to "sit still". Political myths, though do not present any final solution. As Bottici notes of political myths, "they must be open to the possibility of being retold according to … changing circumstances. Utopias can be eternal. A political myth can be old, even ancient, but never eternal" [7] (p. 199).

The acceptable utopia I propose, though, does indeed move. Like the utopias Bottici describes, it is eternal, insofar as its asymptotic progression away from hierarchy and domination is, def-initionally, endless. This is its strategic quality. Yet, as provisional in the actual, local tactics it imagines and as always iterative and open to revision or dismissal, the acceptable utopia shares resemblances with the political myth. Therefore, as a provisionally eternal vision, an acceptable utopia would achieve the best balance between older utopias and political myths.

As even mainstream political philosophers have noted, it is possible to negate so many things that we find our way to something solid to build upon.[20] We have, by implication, the outlines of another world. By the process of elimination, we know that this world would be socialist—because it would not be economically hierarchical. This world would be democratic—

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eliminate the most harmful kinds of power-relations.

[20] This cautious, negative approach to universalism is largely the one taken by Serene Khader in her writing on a transnational feminism. See [28].

because it would not be politically hierarchical. This world would be fluid and borderless and compassionate—because it would not be socially hierarchical. It would be something along the lines of a networked, federated system of participatory democracies, work syndicates, and affinity groups—because it would neither allow a single political estate, economic class, or social group to represent "The People" nor would it doom persons to life alone in the woods.

What acceptable utopias would not do is demand we give up the vision and the inten- tion of abolishing the State, capitalism, or other pernicious, structural hierarchies simply because we now understand these macro-systems to be less rigid or less unitary than we once thought they were. That is precisely the danger of post-structuralist anarchism—that we will forget our dreams. But the pregnant possibility of post-structuralist anarchism is that we can refashion our dreams, to make them better. We now understand that our goal is *dia-rhizomatic*—network wide—rather than simply a strategic matter of toppling a block-like government or corporation. Still, our emergent, emerging goal is the same: to uproot domination and oppression.

Those who rightly insist that there is no royal road to revolution mistakenly believe that when we give up a single path we must also give up a single direction. But there is nothing troubling in asserting "That future, over yonder, in *that* direction, is where we ought to go". Without a sense of where we are headed, we are adrift. No amount of soul-searching or inward-development can fill the sails of a motionless boat. Whatever we call these acceptable utopias—"post-structuralist anarchist utopias", "ablative utopias", or even simply "yonderings"—they must retain a sense of that direction, even as they acknowledge that there is no single way to move forward.[21]

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[21] Newman himself, when discussing the endless interplay of dominations, is forced to admit that movement in a better direction is possible. He writes, "This is not to say, of course, that there have not been significant advancements

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on a world scale". [4] (p. 1).

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