

### 4.3 Epistemological Problems

The final criticism, one pursued most rigorously by Newman, through Stirner, is that there are no ultimate grounds for claiming universal truths. Newman initially concentrates on the anti-essentialist grounds for rejecting universal claims to truth, that there is no natural entity or intuitive pre-given quality which constitutes the 'good'. Appeals to external authorities such as God or abstractions such as 'society' rest on unknowable, untestable constructions: 'a new spook, a new "supreme being"'.<sup>64</sup> Even appeals to essential human attributes are inevitably incomplete: 'nothing that is designated as my essence exhausts me'.<sup>65</sup> For whatever is imposed as a definition of the essential self can always be transcended. Instead these appeals to abstractions hide the fact that moral rules (or 'fixed ideas') are simply the result of unchallenged irrational traditions<sup>66</sup> that frequently serve the interests of powerful individuals.<sup>67</sup> In their place, Stirner argues, the individual should concentrate only on their everchanging needs and desires, and take responsibility for constructing an account of the good which meets these desires: 'Ownness *created* a new *freedom*; for ownness is the creator of everything.'<sup>68</sup>

Even the realist assumption that reason can identify universal criteria for the good is open to critique by postanarchists. Foucauldians identify how different social practices have their own distinctive discourse and mode of reasoning.<sup>69</sup> The questioning of a universal form of reason (*logos*) is of no surprise

<sup>64</sup> Stirner, 1993: 130; Newman, 2001: 60–61.

<sup>65</sup> Stirner, 1993: 366.

<sup>66</sup> Stirner, 1993: 43–44; Newman, 2001: 65–66.

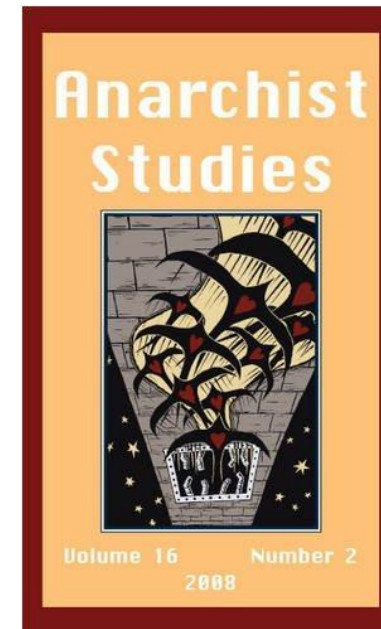
<sup>67</sup> Stirner, 1993: 4; Newman, 2001: 64.

<sup>68</sup> Stirner: 1993: 163; See also Newman, 2001: 69

<sup>69</sup> See Foucault's descriptions of the development of clinical diagnosis, anatomy and pathology, with their constructed medical gazes and distinctive, albeit overlapping, principles, institutions and discourses in *Birth of the Clinic* (London: Routledge, 1997); May, 1994: 98–99.

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of ethical principles is read as a form of moral realism, as Crowder does,<sup>59</sup> then it prioritises those individuals who are most able to develop and practise mutual aid. Those who lack ‘natural sympathy’ are no longer classed as humans but as ‘monsters’.<sup>60</sup> Rules which apply to all regardless of context ignore, and therefore disadvantage, those who are in an unequal position to begin with.

The imposition of a single, universal set of moral principles, as

Newman points out, again with reference to Stirner, means creating institutions capable of imposing this standard.<sup>61</sup> It extends the power of the state and its functionaries, and also restricts the areas for difference and pluralism.<sup>62</sup> By contrast, a view of the good which is based on social practices does not promote uniformity, as distinctive practices have different norms (and agents) and would not require a universal set of regulations to be imposed from outside. For instance the rules of chess, which are different to those of football or poker, are not required to be imposed on the players (though of course it is also possible to coerce people into playing); participants merely must share and abide by these principles in order to gain the benefits from the game, such as improved concentration and patience.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Crowder, 1991: 157–68. Other commentators, such as Jesse Cohn and Shawn Wilbur, have suggested that Kropotkin is merely trying to open up a space for benevolent social action against the realism of conservative social Darwinists, who held that the battle for survival determined all social behaviour, J. Cohn and S. Wilbur ‘What’s Wrong With Postanarchism?’, *From the Libertarian Library*, July 8 2007 <<http://libertarian-library.blogspot.com/2007/07/cohn-and-wilbur-whats-wrong-with.html>> last accessed 8 March 2008.

<sup>60</sup> Kropotkin, 1992: 40.

<sup>61</sup> Stirner, 1993: 98–99.

<sup>62</sup> S. Newman, *Power and Politics in Poststructuralist Thought: New theories of the political* (London: Routledge, 2005), 17.

<sup>63</sup> MacIntyre, 2006: 188.

brium of public opinion is more diffuse than state imposed sanctions.<sup>56</sup> Further, by having moral standards outside of social deliberation, it means that individuals are not free to influence the production of norms and values. A virtue theory, which sees valuative principles generated in social practices, and open to deliberation and alteration, avoids this problem.

## 4.2 Realism and Hierarchy

The second criticism of moral universalism — namely that it is inevitably hierarchical — appears, at first glance, to be somewhat counterintuitive. For a single, categorical law applicable to all, regardless of class, gender or ethnicity, appears to support the egalitarian motives that the major classical anarchists professed. It is for this reason that ethical realism still has advocates within sections of the radical egalitarian movements.<sup>57</sup> However, identical universal rights or attempts to impose one single law of value (such as the hedonic calculus, or the governance principles of the free- market) onto all would privilege those whose desires fitted this natural order.

An example of the ways in which universalist claims can result in hierarchies of power comes from Kropotkin’s description of mutual aid as ‘an empirically discovered law of Nature’ which determines moral principles.<sup>58</sup> If this view of the origins

<sup>56</sup> R. Amstell, ‘Chasing Rainbows? Utopian Pragmatics and the search for Anarchist Communists’, <[www.geocities.com/collectivebook/rainbows.html](http://www.geocities.com/collectivebook/rainbows.html)> last accessed 12 April 2008.

<sup>57</sup> See for instance Norman Geras’s defence of Enlightenment ‘universalist values’ in ‘Marxism, the Holocaust and September 11: An Interview with Norman Geras’, *Imprints: A Journal of Analytical Socialism* Vol. 6 no. 3 (2002), online at <<http://eis.bris.ac.uk/~plcdib/imprints/normangerasinterview.html>>, last accessed 13 May, 2008 and N. Geras *Solidarity in the Conversation of Humankind* (London: Routledge, 1995); G. Purchase, ‘Anarchy in the UK #2’, *Rebel Worker*, Vol. 27 No. 2 (199) (April-May 2008), pp. 15–20: 15.

<sup>58</sup> Kropotkin, 1992: 21.

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There are possible replies to this. Some anarchist thinkers who do appeal to universal standards claim this does not necessitate a commitment to their coercive imposition. There is, as Crowder discusses, a difference between claiming that there exist universal principles of moral action and the claim that others have the right to impose them.<sup>52</sup> This distinction opens up the possibility of an anarchist *amoralism*: that there are universal standards of right or wrong but that they have no binding power on the individual.<sup>53</sup> Bakunin's account in *God and the State* provides a noteworthy instance: even if there was a God, and therefore God-given, universal laws, it would not mean that we would have to obey them.<sup>54</sup>

There are a number of replies to both amoralism and the moral universalist. The first is that it is simply inconsistent. Apparent amoralists like Bakunin and CrimethInc collective do appeal to moral standards in their writings that seek to guide and inspire action against hierarchies of class and gender and propose alternatives to the deadening tedium of managed activity.<sup>55</sup> The amoralist is right that moral discourse need not provide binding regulation, but this does not mean it does not influence human action through guidance, provocation or warning. The problem is that for moral universalists, if norms are fixed and absolute then the degree of autonomy is nonetheless restricted.

By identifying certain standards as eternally 'the good', universalists do prescribe, even if it is just through social pressure, or norms of behaviour, and because these are universal, there is no possibility for adaptation or change. Thus, the criticism of anarchist realist moral philosophy still stands, as it allows for the coercive power of public opinion, even if such oppo-

<sup>52</sup> Crowder, 1991:171–72.

<sup>53</sup> CrimethInc, 'No Masters', 2008.

<sup>54</sup> Bakunin, 'God and the State', *Anarchism.Net*, <<http://www.anarchism.net/godandthestate.htm>>, last accessed 30 May, 2008.

<sup>55</sup> CrimethInc, 2008; Bakunin, 2008.

tivist alternative.<sup>49</sup> The postanarchists who follow Stirner (and Nietzsche) reject universalism in both its realist and naturalist forms on three main grounds. First, it would mean that external, universal standards would be shaping destinies, rather than individuals creating their own goals. Second, the application of universal principles promotes rather than eliminates hierarchies of power. Finally, there are no epistemic bases to universal rules, and thus the discovery and the promotion of such rules are, instead, the product of oppressive social powers. Each of these criticisms are addressed in turn.

#### 4.1 Disempowerment: Universal Principles and Agent Freedom

Postanarchists reject universalism because if there were universal laws for social interaction it would foreshorten the possibilities for moral subjects to determine their own ends. If there are universal, set standards then moral agents would have to live up to these, and thus be denied the freedom to determine their own values.<sup>50</sup> Postanarchists, such as Newman (through Stirner), suggest that anarchism is not just limited to freely choosing between right and wrong action (traditional Humanism), but requires being able to influence what constitutes 'the right'. The universalising of moral rules regulates human activity and restricts agent freedom and self-creation.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> John Moore, 'Lived Poetry: Stirner, anarchy, subjectivity and the art of the living' in J. Purkis and J. Bowan, eds., *Changing Anarchisms: Anarchist theory and practice in a global age* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004): pp.55–72.

<sup>50</sup> May, 1994: 127–28; N. J. Jun, 'Deleuze, Derrida and Anarchism', *Anarchist Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2007), pp.132–56: 138–39; a view also held, if somewhat inconsistently, by Bakunin (Bakunin, 1953: 125).

<sup>51</sup> S. Newman, *Unstable Universalities: Poststructuralism and radical politics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 123–24.

## Editorial: Postanarchism

SAUL NEWMAN

Postanarchism is emerging as an important new current in anarchist thought, and it is the source of growing interest and debate amongst anarchist activists and scholars alike, as well as in broader academic circles. Given the number of internet sites, discussion groups, and new books and journal publications appearing on postanarchism, it is time that the challenges it poses to classical anarchist thought and practice are taken more seriously.

Postanarchism refers to a wide body of theory — encompassing political theory, philosophy, aesthetics, literature and film studies — which attempts to explore new directions in anarchist thought and politics. While it includes a number of different perspectives and trajectories, the central contention of postanarchism is that classical anarchist philosophy must take account of new theoretical directions and cultural phenomena, in particular, postmodernity and poststructuralism. While these theoretical categories have had a major impact on different areas of scholarship and thought, as well as politics, anarchism tends to have remained largely resistant to these developments and continues to work within an Enlightenment humanist epistemological framework<sup>1</sup> which many see as being in need of updating. At the same time, anarchism — as a form of political theory and practice — is becoming increas-

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<sup>1</sup> This was described by Isaiah Berlin to involve a commitment to three principles: that all genuine questions can be answered; that all answers are knowable and that all the answers must also be compatible. See *Roots of Romanticism* (1999, pp. 21–2) — RK.

ingly important to radical struggles and global social movements today, to a large extent supplanting Marxism. Postanarchism seeks to revitalise anarchist theory in light of these new struggles and forms of resistance. However, rather than dismissing the tradition of classical anarchism, postanarchism, on the contrary, seeks to explore its potential and radicalise its possibilities. It remains entirely consistent, I would suggest, with the libertarian and egalitarian horizon of anarchism; yet it seeks to broaden the terms of anti-authoritarian thought to include a critical analysis of language, discourse, culture and new modalities of power. In this sense, postanarchism does not understand *post* to mean being ‘after’ anarchism, but *post* in the sense of working at and extending the limits of anarchist thought by uncovering its heterogeneous and unpredictable possibilities.

This issue explores some of these new approaches to anarchist theory and practice. Benjamin Noys’ essay is important in this respect because it seeks to highlight a series of problems and conceptual and practical limitations that these new anarchist approaches often encounter. His essay explores the proximity — as well as critical distance — of contemporary thinker, Alain Badiou to anarchism. While Badiou’s political thought seems to reflect certain anarchist ideas about a radical politics that is autonomous from the Party and the State, he is also extremely critical of anarchism, and especially of what he sees as the libertarian element of the global anti-capitalist movement. For Badiou, these anti-globalisation ‘movementists’ — drawing on motifs of flux, flows of desire and deterritorialisation derived from poststructuralists such as Deleuze and Guattari, as well as Hardt and Negri — fetishise and, in a sense, mimic the movement of global capitalism itself, and are unable to gain any critical distance from it. Noys uses this critique to work through questions of strategy, organisation and coherence which are central to the anti-authoritarian radical politics today — for instance, is a contemporary anarchist politics prac-

as Daniel Colson have argued that Nietzsche has relevance for the tactical developments of more contemporaneous class struggle anarchism.<sup>42</sup>

For the sake of simplicity, the concentration will be on Stirner’s critique, as Nietzsche’s is more open to more social versions of anarchism, as the examples of Aldred, Colson and Sean Sheehan have suggested. Call, for example, explains that Nietzsche identifies how social forces play an important role in the construction of the aesthetic project.<sup>43</sup> This is a stance that is rejected by Stirner. This is not to suggest, as John P. Clark proposes, that Stirner is ‘validly’ placed within the individualist anarchism tradition,<sup>44</sup> despite his evident influence on the individualist tradition.<sup>45</sup> Stirner’s rejection of any fixed social principle, such as property rights,<sup>46</sup> and his condemnation of free-market competition,<sup>47</sup> would rule out a direct correspondence with the philosophical individualist tradition of Wolff and Nozick.

Both Stirner and Nietzsche reject the universalism of realism — and both (according to Call and Newman) posit in its place that the creation of values is the product of an always changing individual project.<sup>48</sup> Thus many postanarchist theorists, like John Moore, place Stirner and Nietzsche together because of their shared rejection of realism and their subjec-

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tion: Autonomedia, 2004), 29–39; Kropotkin too admired Nietzsche’s assault on the ‘half-hearted moral conceptions’ of the dominant powers (Kropotkin, 1992: 7).

<sup>42</sup> D. Colson, ‘Nietzsche and the Libertarian Workers’ Movement’, in J. Moore, ed, *I Am Not a Man, I am Dynamite! Friedrich Nietzsche and the anarchist tradition* (Williamsburgh Station: Autonomedia, 2004), pp.12–28.

<sup>43</sup> Call, 2002: 48–49; Sheehan admits such a progressive reading would constitute a ‘selective interpretation’ (2003: 77).

<sup>44</sup> J. Clark, *Max Stirner’s Egoism* (London: Freedom, 1976), 93.

<sup>45</sup> Clark, 1976: 89–91.

<sup>46</sup> M. Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own* (London: Rebel Press, 1993): 259.

<sup>47</sup> Stirner, 1993: 260–63

<sup>48</sup> Call, 2002: 51 and Newman: 2001: 61.

## 4. The Postanarchist Meta-ethical Challenge

Amongst those, within the anarchist canon, whose anti-universalism is most developed is Max Stirner and his influential text *The Ego and Its Own*. It is regarded by Newman as providing the source for a distinctive (post)anarchism that avoids the restrictive essentialism of the classical anarchist canon.<sup>37</sup> Other postanarchists use more overtly Nietzschean sources, notwithstanding Nietzsche's professed distaste for any systemised political doctrine with which he identified 'anarchism'. Nietzsche's anarchist admirers readily admit to his aversion to programmatic anarchist strategies;<sup>38</sup> it is, however, his attacks on universalist political ethics that they find most useful. This is either directly through his primary texts themselves, or through poststructuralist interpreters such as Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida.<sup>39</sup> However, admiration for Nietzschean criticism is not confined to the postanarchists; it is also present in anarchist thinking from earlier anarchist traditions, as exemplified by Guy Aldred<sup>40</sup> and Emma Goldman.<sup>41</sup> More recently, social anarchists such

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<sup>37</sup> Newman, 2001: 51.

<sup>38</sup> Call, 2002: 40–42; A. Koch, 'Dionysian Politics: The anarchist implications of Friedrich Nietzsche's critique of Western epistemology' in J. Moore, ed, *I Am Not a Man, I am Dynamite! Friedrich Nietzsche and the anarchist tradition* (Williamsburgh, USA: Autonomedia, 2004): 49–63, 49; Newman, 2001: 48.

<sup>39</sup> Bey, 2003:126; Lewis Call: 2002, 40–56; May, 1994: 89–91; Franco Riccio, 'The "Death of God"' in J. Moore, ed, *I Am Not a Man, I am Dynamite! Friedrich Nietzsche and the anarchist tradition* (Williamsburgh Station: Autonomedia, 2004), pp. 64–75.

<sup>40</sup> Guy Aldred, 'Friedrich Nietzsche' in J. Moore, ed, *I Am Not a Man, I am Dynamite! Friedrich Nietzsche and the anarchist tradition* (Williamsburgh Station: Autonomedia, 2004), pp. 9–11.

<sup>41</sup> L. Starcross, "'Nietzsche Was an Anarchist': Reconstructing Emma Goldman's Nietzsche Lectures' in J. Moore, ed, *I Am Not a Man, I am Dynamite! Friedrich Nietzsche and the anarchist tradition* (Williamsburgh Sta-

tical and can it achieve anything without some form of organisation; and can the notion of organisation be rethought in ways that avoid the Party form and which do not conflict with anarchism's commitment to decentralised and non-hierarchical forms of activism?

Contrary to what certain anarchist activists and scholars have claimed, postanarchism is not confined to the world of theoretical abstractions; it is concerned with concrete forms of activist politics. In an essay by one of the major theoreticians of poststructuralist anarchism,<sup>2</sup> Todd May provides a postanarchist interpretation of a political movement in Canada that fights for the rights of Algerian 'illegal' immigrants, the *sans-statuts* (those without legalised refugee status). The question of 'illegal' immigrants and the rights of those who, as Arendt would say, have not even the right to have rights, is emerging as one of the major points of antagonism in global capitalism — a site for the new biopolitical barbarism of state sovereignty, as well as a site for the emergence of new forms of activism and radical politics.<sup>3</sup> May uses the thought of philosopher Jacques Ranciere<sup>4</sup> — which he sees as making a major contribution to anarchism and to radical political theory generally — to explore a political logic based on the presupposition of equality. For Ranciere, politics starts with the *fact* of equality, rather than seeing it as a goal to be attained — and it is the assertion of this fact as part of a particular political campaign which has the potential to disrupt the existing political and social order based on relationships of hierarchy, inequality and authority (what Ranciere calls the order of *police*). In the same way, as

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<sup>2</sup> See Todd May, *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism*, University Park PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994.

<sup>3</sup> See for example the direct action network No Borders <<http://www.noborder.org/>>.

<sup>4</sup> May has written extensively on Ranciere, and has published a new book entitled *The Political Thought of Jacques Ranciere: creating equality*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008.

May shows, the Algerian *sans-statuts* in Canada — those absolutely excluded from the dominant order and at the bottom of the social hierarchy — were able to mobilise themselves *as if* they were absolutely equal to the rest of society and *as if* they had the same rights as everyone else. In my view, this is a genuine example of a ‘postanarchist’ politics: a concrete, localised, grass-roots struggle engaged in by those directly concerned, but which, importantly, is able at the same time to transcend its position of particularity by inscribing itself on the universal horizon of equality.

The question of universality is important to postanarchism, and it is this question that is considered by Benjamin Franks in relation to the ethics. Franks explores the ethical dimension of anarchist and postanarchist theory, and tries to develop an understanding of ethics which avoids, on the one hand, the universalising Kantian categorical imperative, and on the other, an ethical subjectivism that Franks attributes to Max Stirner and (somewhat unfairly I think) to myself.<sup>5</sup> For Franks, both these positions are incompatible with anarchist political practice. As an alternative, he proposes a notion of ethics internal to particular practices and identities, negotiable over time and open to critical dialogue. Franks is correct to show that anarchism is deeply concerned with ethical questions, and his essay makes an important contribution to thinking out a distinctly anarchist form of ethics which, while grounded in particular practices and concrete situations, still offers certain norms and standards that foster non-hierarchical relationships and solidarity with others. I entirely agree with this approach to ethics, and would simply add that it is entirely compatible with postanarchism. Despite what many critics allege — and this is an allegation which is more or less made in Franks’ essay — postanarchism does not amount to moral nihilism or ethical subjectivism. Not even Stirner’s philosophy of egoism — as I have tried to show

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<sup>5</sup> Franks defines these terms in his essay — RK.

over whether positive rights exist, or whether the rights of the future generations take precedence of those existing now, appeals to intuitions cannot help, as they differ so widely. Indeed Bakunin, elsewhere, views claims to innate moral sense as an ‘absurdity’ that acts only to reinforce dominant, oppressive norms and takes moral principles into ‘theology’ — a domain outside of critical discourse.<sup>34</sup> For the most part, much (but by no means all) of the classical anarchist canon proposes either a rationalist or scientific naturalist approach to identifying and verifying good action.<sup>35</sup>

The political philosopher, George Crowder, claims that: rationalist, naturalist and to a lesser extent intuitionist, responses were adopted by classical anarchists such as Bakunin, Kropotkin and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, because they provided an alternative to the hierarchical and statist moral teachings justified by the church.<sup>36</sup>

The assumption that natural moral laws can be discovered through application of scientific method or through a single universal reason might have an underlying egalitarian ambition. The shift of ethics away from religious institutions suggests that moral laws are discoverable by all and apply equally to all. However, as postanarchists such as Call, May and Newman, have argued, these claims to universal standards of morality (what is referred to as ‘universalism’) have other repressive characteristics, which make them incompatible with anarchism.

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<sup>34</sup> Bakunin, 1953: 125–27.

<sup>35</sup> For example Bakunin, 1953: 239–41; 415; Kropotkin, 1992: 20; 31. Caution is advised against interpreting the classical anarchists as akin to Positivists. The term ‘science’ in these texts need not refer to the adoption of a singular hypothetico-deductive model of discovery, but could just refer to a range of systematic modes of study.

<sup>36</sup> C. Crowder, *Classical Anarchism: The Political Thought of Godwin, Proudhon, Bakunin and Kropotkin* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991): 89.



anarchist position of meta-ethical universalism, claiming that moral statements are 'facts' like scientific propositions which refer to states external to human operators. Thus, they have the same status as objectively verifiable propositions, though like any scientific finding they are open to challenge and revision.<sup>31</sup> This is what McLaughlin refers to as 'anarchist realism'.<sup>32</sup> The term 'realism', by contrast, is used here to refer to Immanuel Kant's ethic, which is similarly universalist, but which rejects the view that fundamental ethical principles are distinguishable through scientific study. Kant argues that, as phenomena are transitory and observation uncertain, reason alone can identify the universal, categorical principles for binding, moral practice.

Intuitionism, the theory that universal moral truths are discovered not through observation but through a separate moral sense, can be found within anarchism, though rarely in an explicit form. The lack of overtly Intuitionist terminology in classical anarchism can be explained by the fact that G.E. Moore's work, which first named and defended the theory, was published just after the main writings of the classical anarchist canon. However the main theme of intuitionism that there is a separate 'moral sense' that identifies the good is perhaps compatible with features of Kropotkin's and Bakunin's works, where they appear to propose that there is some instinct or drive which is the basis for, and identifies, socially benevolent acts.<sup>33</sup>

However, given the obvious weaknesses of intuitionism, it is largely ignored in favour of alternatives. Intuitionism regards moral truths to be universal and pre-given. Consequently, when there are normative and meta-ethical conflicts

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<sup>31</sup> McLaughlin, 2007: 40.

<sup>32</sup> McLaughlin, 2007: 40n.

<sup>33</sup> M. Bakunin, *The Political Philosophy of Bakunin* (New York: Free Press, 1953): 146; P. Kropotkin, *Ethics: Origin and development* (Montreal: Black Rose, 1992), 11–12.

elsewhere — precludes ethics, and indeed allows for certain forms of social solidarity, which is implicit in his notion of the 'union of egoists'. Whatever the case, Franks makes an important intervention in exploring the politico-ethical contours of contemporary anti-authoritarian thought.

Along with ethics, one of the other major concerns of postanarchism is the role of images, symbols and language in the construction of political identities and meanings. Unlike the classical anarchists who saw a rational coherence in social relations and a human essence at the base of social identities, a postanarchist analysis privileges the function of language and the symbolic order in creating social and political meaning. However, rather than meanings and identities being fixed within a stable structure, they are inherently unstable and open to different and contingent articulations. It is precisely this point which is emphasised by Lewis Call, who has developed a distinctly postmodern approach to anti-authoritarian practices and discourses through an analysis of popular culture, in particular literature and film.<sup>6</sup> In his essay, he explores the graphic novel (1981), and later the film version (2006), *V for Vendetta*, seeing this as a kind of postanarchist political narrative. Central here is the notion of the 'floating signifier' — derived from Lacanian psychoanalysis — in which a particular word or symbol is not fixed to a particular content, but is mobile and can produce different meanings. The examples Call gives are those of the historical figure Guy Fawkes, and also the character 'V' who directly invokes Fawkes as a symbol of resistance against State authority. 'V' in particular, because he remains masked and thus anonymous, operates as a kind of empty presence through which political authority is destabilised and through which a collective resistance is mobilised. The important lesson to be drawn from Call's analysis is that political domination re-

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<sup>6</sup> See Lewis Call, *Postmodern Anarchism*, Lanham MD: Lexington Books, 2003.

lies on a certain control and manipulation of symbols, images and discourses – and therefore, any effective resistance must aim at a destabilisation and a resignification of these forms. Struggles against authority take place at the level of symbolic and even visual – indeed there is no separation here between symbolic and ‘actual’ politics. One only need look at the innovative and politically creative use of symbols and images at anti-global capitalist demonstrations to see examples of this.

One thinker who acknowledges the importance of the visual and aesthetic in radical politics is Jacques Ranciere, to whom I have referred above. In some of his recent work, Ranciere has reflected on the link between art and politics and has emphasised the political significance of the aesthetic, particularly in the idea that politics disturbs existing ‘regimes’ of visibility.<sup>7</sup> Politics is, in other words, about conflicts over what is visible and what is invisible, and art can therefore contribute to a reconfiguration of space and perception through which new political meanings may emerge. In an interview conducted with Noys, May and myself, Ranciere reflects on the position of the artist, as well as the ‘anarchist’ implications of his own political thinking, and on more general questions about the state of radical politics today. As the reader might have guessed by now, I see Ranciere as a thinker whose work has major implications for anarchism: while he departs from classical anarchism in important ways – particularly in his rejection of the conceptual opposition between the ‘artificial’ State and the ‘natural’ Society – he also offers new ways of thinking about emancipation, equality, democracy and antiauthoritarian politics.

As this issue shows, postanarchism is not a unified doctrine or political practice, and it raises as many questions and problems as it answers. It is best to see it as an ongoing field of

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<sup>7</sup> See Jacques Ranciere, *The Politics of Aesthetics: the distribution of the sensible*, trans., Gabriel Rockhill, New York: Continuum, 2004.

example of amorality with their rhetorical question: ‘should we serve employers, parents, the State, capitalism, moral law before ourselves?’, which implicitly accepts that moral law exists but should have no binding power.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, many postanarchists have been critical of the universalist claims that underpin the main normative ethical approaches, and have tended towards a subjectivist stance.

Universalism comes in three main forms within meta-ethics, and each is rejected on broadly similar lines by postanarchists. These three main forms are:

1. *Naturalism*: that standards for right conduct are independent of the observer and fixed by nature and discoverable through empirical observation;

2. *Rationalism*: that universal rules can be distinguished by the use of reason and reflection (Kantian rationalism);<sup>28</sup>

3. *Intuitionism* that these general, ahistorical principles can be determined through the use of a separate moral sense or intuition.<sup>29</sup>

Moral naturalism is most associated with utilitarianism. It assumes there is some natural phenomenon, like happiness or the satisfaction of desires, that constitutes an identifiable ground for the good. For naturalists, like John Stuart Mill, the good is scientifically identifiable. Mill argues that empirical observation demonstrates the veracity of utilitarian principles.<sup>30</sup> Paul McLaughlin, whose recent contribution to the philosophy of anarchism, *Anarchism and Authority*, reiterates the classical

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<sup>27</sup> CrimethInc, ‘No Masters’, *CrimethInc*, <<http://www.crimethinc.com/texts/atoz/nomasters.php>>, last accessed 18 June, 2008.

<sup>28</sup> Raphael, *Moral Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press): 18–22.

<sup>29</sup> Stuart Brock and Edwin Mares, *Realism and Anti-Realism* (Stocksfield: Acumen, 2007): 113–118.

<sup>30</sup> Mill argues that whilst the grounding framework of ethics, like the first principles of science, are not amenable to absolute scientific proof, observation, nonetheless, demonstrates that utilitarian modes of assessment are right (J.S. Mill, *Utilitarianism* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000: 50, 52, 81–82).

The development of greater managerial oversight is the result, argues MacIntyre, of the Enlightenment approaches to ethics. Modern morality seeks universal, rational grounds for decision-making, yet has produced only irresolvable disputes<sup>22</sup> and debilitating scepticism.<sup>23</sup> Thus disagreements become settled on the basis of overt power or psychological ploys.<sup>24</sup> MacIntyre's criticisms of Enlightenment moral theory are consistent with the meta-ethical concerns raised by postanarchists, though they diverge in terms of solution.

### 3. Anarchism and Universalist Meta-ethics

The two standard normative ethical approaches associated with Enlightenment and embraced by different constellations of anarchism have been the deontological approaches of the libertarian-right, and the consequential approach of Nechaev. The two have been combined in the Rawls-like anarchism of activists such as Baldelli. Baldelli's economic policy for instance, distinguishes between essential and non-essential goods and labour, and ensures that whilst an essential minimum is provided to all, non-essentials act as a spur for greater initiative which have minimal redistribution.<sup>25</sup> This not only corresponds with Rawlsian distribution but also anticipates Michael Albert's Participatory Economics (Parecon).<sup>26</sup>

By contrast, anarchists, in response to the deficiencies within mainstream Enlightenment thought, have either embraced amoralism or subjectivism. CrimethInc provide a good

enquiry which seeks to explore, unearth, interrogate, rethink and revitalise many aspects of anarchist theory. One thing is for certain though: the contemporary situation demands that anarchism be thought and practiced once again.

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<sup>22</sup> MacIntyre, 2006: 6–8 and 152.

<sup>23</sup> MacIntyre, 2006: 118.

<sup>24</sup> MacIntyre, 2006: 71.

<sup>25</sup> G. Baldelli, *Social Anarchism* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1972): 120–25.

<sup>26</sup> J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973); M. Albert, *Moving Forward: Programme for a Participatory Democracy* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2001).

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and alter over time.<sup>18</sup> Such an approach is rarely explicitly stated partly as a result of the decline in virtue theory due to the rise of Enlightenment approaches to Reason. Nonetheless, both as a cultural residue<sup>19</sup> and as a more systematic approach to analysing moral choices, the language and aims of virtue approaches still arises in anarchist discourse. Virtue theory is consistent with Peter Kropotkin's account of anarchism in *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*, in which it is defined as including the:

development of all his [sic] faculties, intellectual, artistic and moral, without being hampered by overwork for the monopolists, or by the servility and inertia of mind of the great number. He would thus be able to reach full individualization, which is not possible either under the present system of individualism, or under any system of state socialism.<sup>20</sup>

Kropotkin's virtue account is based on an essentialist view of human nature, in which appropriate behaviours are those that lead to the fullest development of the natural individual. Vices, by contrast are those that veer away from the innate goal. However, an account of virtues need not require such an essentialism, and can be based just on those practices that generate the fullest internal goods; vice-like behaviours, by contrast, would be those that undermine practices which have immanent goods, and lead to societal decomposition,<sup>21</sup> thereby requiring even greater managerial control.

<sup>18</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A study in moral theory*, second edition (London: Duckworth, 2006): 155–56.

<sup>19</sup> See MacIntyre on the fragmentation of ethical discourse at the start of *After Virtue*: 1–2.

<sup>20</sup> P. Kropotkin, 'Anarchism', *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1910), available online at <<http://recollectionbooks.com/siml/library/anarchismEncyBrit.htm>>, last accessed April 2, 2007.

<sup>21</sup> MacIntyre, 2006: 194–95.

rhetorical flourish) in Class War's slogan of achieving victory in the class conflict, 'through any means necessary'.<sup>15</sup>

A third, but less overtly theorised, alternative is that of an anarchist virtue ethics. This is based on the oft-repeated principle within anarchism that means have to be in accordance with (or prefigure) ends. Bakunin, for instance, criticised Nechaev precisely because the latter could not 'reconcile means with ends'.<sup>16</sup> Prefiguration avoids the ends/means distinction of rights based and consequentialist ethics; instead the means used are supposed to encapsulate the values desired in their preferred goals.<sup>17</sup>

Prefigurative anarchism is consistent with the main features of Alasdair MacIntyre's virtue ethics. Anarchist virtue theory stresses the immanent values of particular practices rather than the externally decided (consequentialist) values that will accrue, and these practices, which are rich in use-values, collectively build to the most fulfilling type of social-setting. It views goods as being inherent to social practices, rather than seeing goods as being external to the act. These practices have their own rules, which are negotiable

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<sup>15</sup> See Godwin's view that acts should be judged through a utilitarian calculation of the social good that is produced. For instance he assesses the right to private property on a utilitarian evaluation of its social goods and harms in W. Godwin, *The Anarchist Writings of William Godwin* (London: Freedom, 1986): 64–65 and 136.

<sup>16</sup> M. Bakunin, 'Mikhail Bakunin to Sergey Nechaev, June 2, 1870' in *Bakunin on Violence* (New York: Anarchist Switchboard, 1993e), 9.

<sup>17</sup> A. Carter, *A Radical Green Political Theory* (London: Routledge, 1999): 26667; Jonathan Purkis and James Bowen, 'Conclusion: How anarchism still matters' in J. Purkis and J. Bowen, *Changing Anarchism: Anarchist theory and practice in a global age*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005, 220; See too Uri Gordon, *Anarchism and Political Theory: Contemporary Problems*, PhD Thesis, Mansfield College, Oxford University, 2006: 172 and 203, available at <[http://ephemer.al.cl.cam.ac.uk/~gd216/uri/0.1\\_-\\_Front\\_Matter.pdf](http://ephemer.al.cl.cam.ac.uk/~gd216/uri/0.1_-_Front_Matter.pdf)>, last accessed 30 June, 2007.

several decades, including Palestinian rights, antiapartheid work, and labor movements.

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# Through a Glass Darkly: Alain Badiou's critique of anarchism

BENJAMIN NOYS

## Abstract

The French philosopher Alain Badiou is one of a number of contemporary theorists whose work has been identified as a source for postanarchism. This essay questions that identification by focusing on Badiou's sustained criticism of anarchist and libertarian currents for their failure to engage fully with the difficulties of political power, and in particular their failure to break with capitalist and statist political forms. Although problematic, these criticisms converge with existing debates in the 'movement of movements', which have started to address the difficulty of finding egalitarian forms of practice to sustain the movement. These debates lead us towards the often elided problem of the relationship between postanarchist theory and anarchist practice.

It has become a commonplace to argue that we have witnessed the resurgence or renaissance of anarchism in recent years, particularly with the emergence of the 'movement of movements' after the Seattle uprising of 1999 or the earlier Chiapas uprising of 1994. David Graeber has poetically summarised the case: 'Anarchism is the heart of the movement, its soul; the source of what's most new and hopeful about it'

## 2. Anarchist Ethics — a Brief Overview

The different traditions of anarchism can be partly identified through their adoption of distinctive ethical traditions, the corresponding discourses and social apparatuses. The free-market, libertarian-right forms of anarchism propounded by Robert Nozick and Robert Paul Wolff, are based on a deontological ethical theory,<sup>11</sup> in which the negative rights of the liberal, sovereign agent take priority. Thus anarchism, as the commentator on Aristotle, David Keyt, proposes, is boiled down to the single objective of avoiding coercion,<sup>12</sup> even if it creates disparities in power. Within the realms of academic philosophy this version of anarchism has become so successful that the term is used almost entirely to refer to this form of right-libertarianism.<sup>13</sup>

By contrast, the other popular conception of anarchism comes from the insurrectionary tradition, often associated with Sergei Nechaev. Nechaev's consequentialism permits hierarchical and repressive interventions as they are justified if they efficiently bring about the millennial event — the social revolution.<sup>14</sup> A similar ends-based normative anarchist ethic can be identified both in proto-anarchist writings, such as William Godwin, and more recently (though perhaps only as a

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<sup>11</sup> R. Wolff, *In Defence of Anarchism* (London: Harper Torchbooks, 1976); R. Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988).

<sup>12</sup> D. Keyt, 'Aristotle and Anarchism', in R. Kraut and S. Skultety, eds., *Aristotle's Politics: Critical Essays* (Oxford: Rowan and Littlefield, 2005), pp. 203–22: 204.

<sup>13</sup> See for instance D. Copp, 'The Idea of a Legitimate State', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Winter, 1999), pp. 3–45: 11; D. Knowles, 'The Domain of Authority', *Philosophy*, Volume 82 (Jan. 2007), pp.23–43: 42; F. Lovett, 'Can Justice be Based on Consent', *Journal of Political Philosophy*, Vol. 12 (2): 79–101: 86.

<sup>14</sup> S. Nechaev, *Catechism of the Revolutionist* (London: Violette Nozieres Press and Active Distribution, 1989): 9.

embodies the moral principles which she espouses (*ethos*).<sup>8</sup> However, this interest in ethics has, in recent years, been supplemented by a renewed interest in meta-ethics, which has corresponded with the relatively recent development of *postanarchism*.

Postanarchism is itself a complex phenomenon, which is viewed either as a new hybrid of anarchism with post-structuralism<sup>9</sup> or as a return to the radical political content of poststructuralism.<sup>10</sup> As a result, the theorists who are associated with postanarchism have raised important questions about the metaphysical status of ethical claims, and in doing so have highlighted the moral context of metaphysical considerations. Amongst the core theorists in postanarchism are Lewis Call, Todd May and Saul Newman. This paper, however, concentrates on Newman's useful critique of universalism, which is based on reasserting Max Stirner's egoism in contemporary political analysis. Whilst Newman, through Stirner, accurately highlights many of the weaknesses in anarchist universalism, its alternative — a radical subjectivism — has a number of weaknesses which make it a questionable basis for determining moral action. Instead of Stirnerite egoism, a modest, multi-functionalist approach is proposed, that avoids the oppressive and hierarchical dimensions of traditional anarchist universalism, but also evades the limits of subjectivism.

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<sup>8</sup> Ian Bone, one of the founders of Class War, for instance, lambasts anti-elitist radicals for coming from, and using, their privileged backgrounds to attain leadership roles within supposedly anti-hierarchical institutions and social movements. See for instance 'Fake Labour Toff Is A Toff!'

<sup>9</sup> S. Newman, 'Is There a Postanarchist Universality? A Reply to Michael Glavin', *Perspectives on Anarchist Theory*, (Fall 2004): 40–53: 50 <<http://olymedia.mahost.org/vol8no2.pdf>>, last accessed June 2, 2008.

<sup>10</sup> J. Adams, 'Postanarchism in a Bombshell', *Aporia Journal*, Issue 2, <<http://aporiajournal.tripod.com/postanarchism.htm>>, last accessed 23 June, 2008.

(2002: 62). This new attention to anarchist practice has been accompanied by a renewed interest in anarchist theory. In this, important parallels have been noted between the work of leading thinkers and philosophers, including Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Michel Foucault, Jacques Ranciere, and anarchist themes and approaches. What is striking in both cases, especially the second, is the general absence of anarchism as an explicit reference point. It seems as if anarchism is the politics that dare not speak its name. One of the results of this absence has been the significant effort by anarchists or those sympathetic to anarchism to re-establish the anarchist credentials of the present. As Saul Newman, one of those responsible for this effort has put it: 'perhaps anarchism can be seen as the hidden referent for contemporary radical politics' (2007: 12). In fact, as Newman himself stresses, this is one way to define postanarchism: as the production of a synthesis that will establish that both contemporary radical political practice and political theory constitutes a new form, or new paradigm, for anarchism.

To make good on this argument postanarchist thinkers have typically made a double move. First they have argued that many contemporary theories, which are usually identified as post-structuralist or post-Marxist, are better understood through the lens of a revised anarchism. While these theories often remain attached to a residual Marxism or are vague about their political implications, integrated into anarchism they can become truly radical. The ways in which these theories challenge the primacy of class explanation, attack the dominance of the state and attend to the micro-politics of power, converge with anarchist thought and practice. The second move is to argue that these theories allow us to purge 'traditional' anarchism of its humanist, naturalist, and positivist residues. Post-structuralist or post-Marxist thought allows us to shift anarchism away from its supposed reliance on a set of 'essential' human qualities or norms that would then dictate a natural, or true, politics. In this

way, it is argued, these theories open anarchism up to a new thinking 'that embraces contingency and indeterminacy and rejects essentialist identities and firm ontological foundations' (Newman 2007: 16). The postanarchist synthesis is then often linked to the new forms of decentered and dispersed practice in the movement of movements, to this new political and social inventiveness that remains unconstrained by the limits of traditional anarchism. In this way a narrative has been constructed in which the 'hidden referent' of anarchism is explicit: our moment is anarchist in theory and practice if we fundamentally revise what we mean by anarchism to become postanarchist.

Critics rightly argue that this seemingly persuasive narrative tends to flatten the depth of traditional anarchism into the cliché of 'essentialism' (Cohn 2002). Yet my concern is the way in which postanarchism operates with a smooth and trouble free narrative of its emergence as a new paradigm, while claiming to inject into politics conflict and antagonism. I want to suggest that the making of postanarchism is considerably more problematic by focusing on the case of one thinker who has started to be assimilated within postanarchism, the French philosopher and political militant Alain Badiou. My reason for selecting Badiou is that despite having much in common with anarchism and postanarchism he is also highly critical of anarchism, claiming that it is unable to deal with the complexities and practicalities of power. In this way Badiou raises crucial issues for both anarchist theory and anarchist practice, questions which remain unsettled.

First I will consider the reason why Badiou has been considered attractive to postanarchism. This will involve a discussion of Badiou's own political and theoretical evolution. In particular I will focus on his discussion of the Paris Commune of 1871, in which his arguments concerning this workers' uprising converge with anarchist arguments. Secondly, I will consider in more detail Badiou's criticisms of anarchism. These are not so

best as an economic theory exploring the form of the commodity, whilst 'anarchism is mainly about the ethics of practice.'<sup>5</sup> It should be stressed that heterodox Marxists, such as the Autonomist tradition, regard the assertion of *other values* separate to those of capitalism to be a fundamental feature of communism. Autonomists, thus, reject both Orthodox Marxism and the economics/ethics distinction between Marxism and anarchism.<sup>6</sup>

Discussion of the norms or standards used for judging between rival actions has long been a feature of anarchist discourse, although it has not always been identified overtly with the often elite practices of moral philosophy. Some anarchists use largely rights-based deontological approaches, others have proposed ends-based consequentialist criteria, others apply terms redolent of virtue theory (both in its social and individual forms), by reference to descriptions such as 'bravery', 'integrity'<sup>7</sup> and the identification of whether the speaker

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<sup>5</sup> D. Graeber, 'Articles and Interviews by Mark Thwaite', *Ready, Steady Book*, January 16, 2007, <<http://www.readysteadybook.com/Article.aspx?page=davidgraeber>> last accessed June 18, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> See for instance Massimo De Angelis, 'Value(s), Measure(s) and Disciplinary Markets', *The Commoner* No. 10 (2005) <[www.commoner.org.uk/10deangelis.pdf](http://www.commoner.org.uk/10deangelis.pdf)>, last accessed 2, June, 2008; John Holloway, *Change the World Without Taking Power* (London: Pluto, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> See for instance the defence of Bakunin's proposal to develop public institutions which maintain and embody 'integrity' (Anarchist (Communist) Federation, *Basic Bakunin* (Coventry: Anarchist Communist Editions, 1991) available on line at *Spunk Press*, <<http://www.spunk.org/texts/writers/bakunin/sp001862.html>>, last accessed 2 June 2008; the description and assessment of activists resisting military action as 'brave' (Anarchist Federation, 'War Resisters in Israel', *Resistance* No. 35, <<http://www.afed.org.uk/res/resist35.html>> last accessed 30 May, 2008) whilst by contrast state institutions are referred to as 'cowardly' for systematically using force to belittle and subjugate those in deprived situations (Anarchist Federation 'UK Terror HQ Found!', *Resistance* No. 13 <<http://www.afed.org.uk/res/resist13.html>> last accessed 30 May, 2008).



in relation to particular arenas, which intersect, and whose standards adapt) is proposed.

## 1. Introduction

The realms of academic philosophy and anarchist activism rarely have much in common. However, where they both discuss and contrast anarchism with orthodox Marxism they do draw similar conclusions, namely that the historical determinism of the first prioritises economic discourse, whilst anarchism by contrast has foregrounded moral analyses and terminology.<sup>1</sup> Orthodox Marxists (Leninists), too, have identified this distinction as pivotal to the understanding of the difference between anarchism and other competing radical movements. For Leninists, the emphasis on moral evaluation is due to anarchism's ignorance of the determining nature of the economic base<sup>2</sup> or failure to apply the right scientific method.<sup>3</sup>

Anarchists such as David Wieck also accept the distinction between the moral discourse of anarchism in contrast to the alternative modes of address of rival traditions, but he celebrates the way that the 'anarchist tradition takes *ethical* premises as its point of departure.'<sup>4</sup> David Graeber also identifies the different approaches, but sees merit in both: Marxism is at its

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance P. McLaughlin, *Anarchism and Authority: A philosophical introduction to classical anarchism* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007): 50n; S. Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding* (London: Verso, 2007): 13; Andrew Flood, 'The Left (part 1): Ashes to phoenix?', *Red and Black Revolution*, No. 1: 7.

<sup>2</sup> Workers International League, 'Anarchism', *Socialist Appeal*, June 07, 2006, <[www.socialistappeal.org/content/view/full/163/77/](http://www.socialistappeal.org/content/view/full/163/77/)>, last accessed May 29, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> MC5, 'Noam Chomsky' Secular Stairway to Heaven', *Maoist International Movement*, November 2005, <[www.etext.org/Politics/MIM/bookstore/books/commie/chomskyanarchism.html](http://www.etext.org/Politics/MIM/bookstore/books/commie/chomskyanarchism.html)>, last accessed May 29, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> D. Wieck, 'Preface' to G. Baldelli, *Social Anarchism* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1972), 11.

much directed at anarchism per se but they do take in many of the currents of thought that have influenced postanarchism. Finally I want to examine how Badiou's criticisms have found an echo in recent discussions within the anarchist and anti-capitalist milieu. Here we can see emerging a new debate concerning the practical means by which we might achieve and sustain egalitarian and anarchist social forms. My approach then is not to confront directly postanarchism, nor is it to answer the question of whether we can really consider Badiou to be a postanarchist. Instead, by taking a detour through Badiou's criticisms of anarchism, I want to return to consider the difficult question of the link, often elided, between postanarchist theory and anarchist practice.

## Badiou, Anarchist?

At first glance Alain Badiou appears as an unlikely candidate for assimilation into postanarchism, especially if we consider his intellectual and political formation.<sup>1</sup> In the 1960s he was a student of the leading Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, and his early work was concerned with developing theories of aesthetics and of mathematics from a Marxist perspective. Like many others Badiou was radicalised by the events of May 1968, but he did not take up a libertarian or anarchist position. Rather he was one of the founder members of the Maoist organisation Union of Communists of France Marxist-Leninist (UCFML). This group was never slavish in its attitude to the 'official' Maoism of the Chinese Communist Party and it was sceptical about the possibility of building the Party at that time in France, making it an unusual far left formation. Yet it retained a quite typical Marxist attitude to

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<sup>1</sup> The interested reader should refer to the accounts of Bruno Bosteels (2005), Peter Hallward (2003: 29–47), and Jason Barker (2002: 13–38), to which I am indebted in what follows.

anarchist or anarchist style activity — one of condemnation and unremitting criticism. The group dissolved in 1985 and several of its militants, including Badiou, formed a new group Organisation Politique (OP). This new group continued the path of political militancy, but defined itself more firmly as a post-party formation.

In terms of his theoretical work Badiou published his magnum opus *Being and Event* in 1988, translated into English in 2005. This dense work defended the modern project of philosophy through the deployment of the mathematics of set-theory. As the title of the book suggests Badiou was not simply concerned to describe matters as they are but also the possibility of events: radical ruptures with the rules and structures of existing situations. In the field of the political — one of the four fields in which events can take place, alongside art, love and science — this means that he retains a fidelity to the event of revolution, signalled for him by 1917. At the same time, in his own political practice and in various books, essays, and interventions, Badiou has both insisted on the need to revise old political models and the need to constantly contest the politics of the present.

His short book *Ethics* (2001), which forms the best introduction to his work, engages in a violent polemic against the ideological abuse of ‘ethics’ to provide justification for the domination of capitalism and the state. Unusually for a philosopher, Badiou has maintained a dialogue between his theoretical work and political militancy that has persisted through the waning of the political hopes invested in May 1968 and the context of an increasingly reactionary intellectual turn following September 11 and the ‘war on terror’. It is this political intransigence which, in part, makes Badiou such an influential and attractive figure for re-thinking contemporary radical politics.

While Badiou’s own political practice has been hostile to the anarchist tradition there are strong points of convergence between his work and anarchism. The most obvious, which

## Postanarchism and Meta-Ethics

BENJAMIN FRANKS

### Abstract

Competing versions of anarchism are often identifiable through analysis of their distinctive normative ethical approaches. Individualist or ‘philosophical’ anarchisms, such as those influenced by Robert Paul Wolff or Robert Nozick, are often based on deontological theories, which privilege a discourse of ‘rights’ and ‘individual autonomy’. By contrast social anarchisms are often either consequentialist (for instance Sergei Nechaev) — and thus prioritise good social outcomes — or prefigurative (for example, James Guillaume) and as such are more consistent with practise-based virtue ethics.

More recently, postanarchists, such as Saul Newman, have highlighted important meta-ethical differences between the various anarchist constellations. In particular there is tension between the universalism of moral realism (that moral statements are objectively verifiable based on universal standards) and narrow subjectivist positions (right and wrong are based on individual opinion). The strengths and weaknesses of these competing meta-ethical presuppositions are assessed to show that neither moral realism nor subjectivism are a sufficient to ground anti-hierarchical ethics. In their place a multi-functionalist alternative (that values can be assessed

‘insubstantial,’ that is, without an institutional character, is a question for another time. What must be recognised, however, is the part that has no part in a society can, at least sometimes, and in the times in which we live, create a part for themselves, impose themselves as having a part. Or, as Ranciere would have it, in the face of the police orders that govern us, politics remains among our possibilities, when and where there is the context and the will to create it.

*I would like to thank all those who took the time to interview with me about the sans-statuts movement, and especially Mabrouk Rabahi, who gener-*

*ously set up the interviews, translated when it was needed, commented helpfully on an earlier draft of this paper, and generally played the part of the perfect host. In addition to the members of CASS with whom I interviewed, I would also like to thank Julie Mareschal and Andrea Schmidt for both interviewing and offering valuable suggestions on an earlier draft of this paper.*

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stems from his political practice, is his increasing scepticism towards the party form. Badiou regards this form as one that is now exhausted and that must be replaced by a new post-party politics. Another point of convergence is that Badiou has always retained his hostility to the state and to what Deleuze and Guattari identified as ‘State thought’ (1988: 24). Finally, Badiou has always insisted on a radically egalitarian notion of the potential for everyone to be engaged with radical thought and practice. Although Badiou’s thought has shifted and changed he has always maintained these central tenets at the core of his work. It is for these reasons that Saul Newman has drawn on Badiou’s work (amongst others) to define postanarchism, arguing that Badiou ‘veer[s] quite close towards anarchism’ (2007: 12). While this is true, we might also note that Badiou also violently veers *away* from anarchism. To further study this matter of proximity and distance I want to consider a more detailed case of Badiou’s veering towards and away from anarchism in his discussion of the Paris Commune.

In his essay ‘The Paris Commune: A Political Declaration on Politics’ (2003) (in Badiou 2006: 257–290) Badiou takes issue with classical Marxist and Leninist interpretations of the failure of the Paris commune. As Badiou points out the classical Marxist position was ambiguous: on the one hand stressing the dissolution of the state and, on the other hand, the formation of the party as the body capable of seizing and organising a new state (Badiou 2006: 264). He goes on to argue that the Marxist interpretation of the commune embodies this ambiguity, in which the commune, which dissolved the state, is taken to have failed because of the lack of the party. The solution proposed by Marxism to the conundrum is ‘the figure of the party-state’ (Badiou 2006: 264). For Badiou this ‘solution’ is an evasion of the political *truth* of the commune: the truth can only be reached by reactivating the commune as the figure of the dissolution of the state *without* the party, rather than burying it in a narrative of failed revolution. Considering his past, it

is unsurprising that Badiou turns to the Maoism of the Cultural Revolution as an example of such a reactivation. What he suggests, however, is that this represents the point at which Maoism tried and failed to think outside of its Leninist and Stalinist inheritance. While the Chinese proposed the commune as experience to learn from, the attempt to take possible forms outside the domain of the party was reined in 'by the tutelary figure of the party' (Badiou 2006: 269). This failure leads Badiou to pose the question of how, today, 'we have to take up the challenge of thinking politics outside of its subjection to the state and outside of the framework of parties or of the party' (2006: 270). Anarchists might well reply this has been exactly what anarchism has been doing for at least two hundred years ..

What is Badiou's answer to this challenge? First he insists that the commune should be understood as breaking with the context of the 'Left', which Badiou reads as those who translate a political movement back into parliamentary politics (Badiou 2006: 272). This vehement rejection of the existing 'Left' places Badiou in proximity to those anarchists who have articulated 'anarchy after Leftism' (Black 1997), as a critique of the statist residues in Marxism. Unlike the post-Leftist anarchists, however, Badiou is still loyal to the anti-statist elements of Marxism. Rejecting the 'Left' interpretation he holds to his own complex political 'ontology' of the commune that can articulate a truly anti-state analysis. Badiou uses the tools of his own philosophy, which itself deploys the discourse of contemporary mathematics, to articulate the features of the commune. I will not reproduce the detail of this analysis but, in summary, Badiou sees the commune as a particular site of revolutionary politics involving a particular range and organisation of forces. From this site emerge those who have not been considered to count within the political situation — the workers. This appearance of the workers ruptures the existing limits of politics. In Badiou's technical sense the commune is an *event*, which is a rupture of such intensity that it rearranges the terms of a situ-

taken years of legal wrangling to do so. In the meantime, he lived in fear of being deported back to Algeria, and could not engage in building a life in Canada. The most famous among those who were refused, however, is the case of Mohammed Cherfi, one of the leaders of CASS. The Canadian government decided to deport him, saying that he had not 'integrated' himself into Canadian society, although, I was told, he was a French teacher. The problem, CASS members told me, was that his militancy on behalf of the *sans-statuts* was thought to be a threat to the Canadian government. He also took refuge in a church, but in March, 2004, he was taken from the church and deported to the US, where, ironically, he received refugee status in 2005. He is still trying to return to Canada.<sup>22</sup>

The struggle, then, continued past the October, 2002 accord, although gradually at a diminished level as people began to be regularised. Perhaps the most public event was a sit-in in Minister Coderre's office in May, 2003, where eleven *sans-statuts* and two sympathisers were beaten and tasered by the police. They were eventually brought to trial, and, particularly in light of the brutal treatment they received, acquitted on a technicality of all charges in February, 2006.

Ranciere writes that, 'A community of equals is an insubstantial community of individuals engaged in the ongoing creation of equality. Anything else paraded under this banner is either a trick, a school or a military unit.'<sup>23</sup> The movement of the *sans-statuts* was, and to a lesser extent continues to be, the creation of precisely such an insubstantial community. Built on nothing other than the presupposition of their equality to one another and to those in whose midst they found themselves, they organised a campaign that, in the end, mobilised an obligation to hear. Whether or not such a community must remain

<sup>22</sup> For more on Cherfi's case, see Mareschal, Julie, '*Politiques repressives et droits des refugies: vers de nouvelles formes de solidarities*,' *Vivre Ensemble*, Vol. 12, #42, Summer 2004.

<sup>23</sup> *On the Shores of Politics*, p. 84.

effect, only when it mobilizes an *obligation* to hear.<sup>20</sup> Did this happen with CASS? If Quebecois society has its experience re-configured, did the movement mobilise an obligation to hear among those in the Canadian state?

On October 20, 2002, six and a half months after the lifting of the moratorium on deportation, after a series of demonstrations and meetings with officials, a family of Algerian refugees facing deportation sought refuge in the United Union Church in Montreal. Mourad Bourouisa, his pregnant wife Yakout Seddiki, and their two-year-old son were scheduled to board a plane headed back to Algeria, but, fearing that they would be slaughtered upon their return, decided to ask for asylum in the church.<sup>21</sup> This proved to be the watershed event in the struggle of the *sans-statuts*. Although the Bourouisa-Seddiki family were not members of CASS, they were in contact with them, and received their support. The standoff lasted ten days, and on October 30, the Canadian federal and Quebecois government agreed to a new procedure for reviewing the files of the *sans-statuts*. Henceforth, those who had been denied papers by the Canadian authorities could apply to have their situation re-evaluated separately through a Quebecois procedure. Thus, the thousand Algerian *sans-statuts* would have available to them a means of being accepted as refugees, and eventually Canadian citizens.

Under this new procedure, many of the *sans-statuts* became legal. CASS's activities changed somewhat, focusing not only on advocacy but also on helping people file the proper documents in the new review procedure. However, not everyone was covered. For instance, I interviewed a man who had long been refused under the new procedure because he could not prove that he had actually been a *sans-statut* under the old rules. Although his situation was being regularised, it had

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<sup>20</sup> *On the Shores of Politics*, p. 86.

<sup>21</sup> [http://www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2002/10/21/algerians\\_021021.html](http://www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2002/10/21/algerians_021021.html)

ation and allows us to draw out new egalitarian political consequences (similar to what is commonly called a 'revolution').

Those who did not and could not appear yesterday — in 1871, the workers — now come into existence in all their subversive force. The commune consequently realised a new possibility: the emergence of an independent workers' movement. In other words, what the commune announces is the possibility of another world (Badiou 2006: 289). What is striking in this conclusion is how close Badiou's analysis comes to anarchism, especially contemporary anarchism: his rejection of the state as object of political power; his vehement criticism of the existing 'Left' and his articulation of an independent political power of the excluded that questions the very concept of 'democracy'. Badiou even appears to be moving towards the slogan 'another world is possible'.

Nevertheless, in a companion piece on the Cultural Revolution Badiou makes clear his continuing hostility to 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 the double, or the shadow, of the communist parties, just as the black flag is only the double or the shadow of the red flag (2006: 321).

As we will see, behind this rather lamentable critique of anarchism is something more serious. We might regard Badiou's outburst as a symptom of defensive anxiety: he rejects anarchism because anarchists had been elaborating a politics without party and an anti-statist position long before him. But rather than develop this diagnostic strategy, I want to analyse further what might explain his animus. My contention is that

some of the scepticism Badiou directs towards anarchism is echoed by anarchists themselves.

## Badiou's Critique of Anarchism

Badiou's critique of anarchism operates indirectly; it attacks what Daniel Bensaid describes as '[a] neo-libertarian current, more diffuse but more influential than the direct heirs of anarchism ... [which] constitutes a state of mind, a "mood", rather than a well-defined orientation' (Bensaid 2005: 170). One of Badiou's examples of this tendency, which he identified when he was still a Maoist, is Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's book *Anti-Oedipus* (1972). This book, with its vision of a flux of desire that can escape the constraints of both capitalism and the 'prison' of the Freudian Oedipus complex, not only had a significant influence on the libertarians of the movements after May '68 but also on later anarchists and postanarchists. Where anarchists have tended to celebrate their theories of the uncontrollable fluxes of desire Badiou sarcastically comments: 'Unforeseeable, desiring, irrational: follow your drift, my son, and you will make the Revolution' (2004: 76). This point summarises Badiou's general scepticism towards what he regards as the anarchist faith in the 'pure' movement of resistance, a movement that seems to operate without the need for aim or direction but will somehow still result in revolution.

Badiou refines this general scepticism in making a series of more precise criticisms of the 'libertarian current'. He argues that the central problem of this current is that it sets up a simple-minded opposition between power and resistance (or revolt, or rebellion). The result is a sterile set of 'static dualisms', from which is derived 'the catechism of the System and the Flux, the Despot and the Nomad, the Paranoiac, and the Schizo' (Badiou 2004: 80). In this case Badiou is explicitly referring to

new or different, reconfigure the field of our experience. This is what happened in the months of 2002. Something appeared that had been previously invisible to much of Quebecois society: the *sans-statuts*. Although 'not previously identifiable,' through CASS they become identifiable. And once identifiable, they could become identified with. First, they were visible, they were among us. Then, as their visibility impressed itself upon Quebecois society, they became, at least for some Quebecois, part of us. The subjectification of the *sans-statuts* rearranged the *partage du sensible* of Quebec's political world.

For Ranciere, this is what constitutes democracy. 'Democracy is the community of sharing, in both senses of the term: a membership in a single world which can only be expressed in adversarial terms, and a coming together which can only occur in conflict. To postulate a world of shared meaning is always transgressive.'<sup>19</sup> Democracy, then, is a process, a process of political subjectification that is coextensive with the presupposition of equality.

But what of success? Isn't politics about change? And if so, doesn't its definition require that there be some sort of change in order for it to be a real political movement? In some sense, there is already change with the very appearance of the movement, a change in the partition or distribution of the sensible. If we go further than this, we risk betraying the character of democratic politics that Ranciere has posited. For if we require political change in order for there to be a real politics, a democratic politics, then that politics depends not on the presupposition of equality but on the response of those who so often deny it. Politics becomes parasitic on those against whom it takes place. This is precisely what Ranciere wants to deny.

This does not mean that results are irrelevant. They matter. But they do not define a political movement. As Ranciere puts it, a democratic politics 'causes equality to have a real social

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<sup>19</sup> *On the Shores of Politics*, p. 49.

defines it, then, has more to do with Badiou's subject than Foucault's. Rather than being created by a set of intersecting power relationships, a subject of politics in this sense (which does not deny that we are also subjects of politics in Foucault's sense) is a self-creation. It is the emergence of a particular *we* from a set of collective actions. Where there were once only disparate individuals, each struggling to survive and to keep from being deported, there emerged, under the name of CASS, a collective movement of *sans-statuts* who recognised themselves as part of a larger whole. Moreover, as this collective politics took hold, those who were not a part of it began to recognise themselves in it. Not only Algerian immigrants, but other Canadian citizens began to see themselves mirrored in the *sans-statuts*, not as struggling refugees but as people seeking to create lives for themselves. One participant in the struggle told me, 'Papers are papers. But we are human.' That recognition, so often denied those who do not have the status of full citizenship, began to take hold as the struggle of the *sans-statuts* became more public in the months after Minister Coderre's April 5 declaration.

The reason for this has to do with a phrase in the Ranciere's passage just quoted. The subject that is produced by political action is one that is 'not previously identifiable within a given field of experience, whose identification is thus part of the re-configuration of a field of experience.' That is to say that a subject appears, is produced, occupies a place in the social order that had previously not existed. Although we can only gesture at this element of Ranciere's thought here, he speaks of experience as involving a *partage du sensible*, a partition or division of the sensible. This *partage* is the creation of sensible elements in their relation to one another. Typically, the *partage du sensible* is an element of the police order. We perceive what we are taught to perceive in the ways we are taught to perceive it. What a political movement can do, however, is to rearrange what and how we perceive, make us see something

a number of oppositions that structure the text of Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, in which the second term is valorised at the expense of the first. The problem with such dualisms is that they fail to grasp the ways in which politics actually operates: 'power' is not one monolithic whole, and neither is 'resistance'. Instead the task of 'doing politics' involves a closer analysis of different forces and contradictions as well as, for Badiou, the formation of the party as the form to handle and organise these contradictions. Whatever we might think of the second point we can, I think, accept the first is well made. While there may be a polemical or motivational gain in presenting politics in terms of a grand opposition, and there may well be times where struggle operates in this form, more often matters are considerably more complex.

For Badiou these kinds of oppositions reflect the limits of the French political scene in the 1970s: namely the opposition between the structuralist Marxism of Louis Althusser, which finds its model in the French Communist Party, and the philosophy of desire that Deleuze and Guattari gave voice to, and which finds its model in the dispersion of the little groups of libertarians ('*groupuscules*'). In the first we find the relentless and paralysing insistence on the power of structure and, in the second, the celebration of 'pure' revolt. We can see here the origin of Badiou's later contention that the anarchist model mirrors the communist party model. Anarchists oppose their small groups to the supposedly 'monolithic' style of the communist party. What they fail to recognise are the fissures and contradictions that run through both power and resistance. In this period Badiou, and the UCFML, are groping towards a new party-form that would be able to negotiate a dialectical reading of politics that could engage with force and place, disruption and structure, without reifying one of the terms against the other.

The irony is that defenders of Deleuze and Guattari, or Michel Foucault, whom Badiou also attacks, will argue that

they present a model of power and resistance as multiple, fluid, and unstable — precisely *not* a binary. Badiou, however, is correct to note a tendency to re-constitute new binaries in these modes of thinking: ‘Schizo vs. Paranoid’ (Deleuze and Guattari), ‘Pleb vs. Power’ (Foucault), or ‘Multitude vs. Empire’ (Negri and Hardt). In each case the attempts at anti-dialectical thinking risk becoming merely un-dialectical. Badiou himself certainly changes the terms of his own thinking, but he retains the mistrust of what he regards as this fundamental libertarian or anarchist schema. So, in the later *Being and Event* (2005) Badiou will critique what he calls ‘speculative leftism’, which believes in the ‘pure’ event of revolt — the miracle of revolt appearing out of nothing.<sup>2</sup> Again his point here is that there is a faith in the emergence of a force of revolt posed against a static sense of power, without any real attempt to analyse the possibilities and limits of the forces that would compose this ‘revolt’. This faith in the miracle of the event of revolt is coupled, Badiou argues, with a sense of the inevitable defeat of such revolts by power. The result is that we are left in the situation of fighting an endless (losing) war — alternating between the eruption of revolt out of nothing and then its inevitable return to nothing.

More recently Badiou has focused his criticisms on the thinking of Antonio Negri (co-author, with Michael Hardt, of *Empire* (2000)), and his influence on the ‘movement of movements’. Badiou tends to conflate Negri with the ‘movement of movements’, and while it is true that the language and thinking of Negri has had considerable influence, it has by no means passed uncontested. Badiou modulates his earlier

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<sup>2</sup> Badiou’s implicit target here is the comparatively little-known work *L’Ange* (1976) by Guy Lardreau and Christian Jambet. This work offered a model of perpetual spiritual revolt, contained in the figure of the ‘Angel’, which combined elements of early Christian asceticism and the extremes of the Maoist Cultural Revolution. For further discussion of this work, and Badiou’s critique, see Alberto Toscano’s article ‘Mao and Manichaeism’ (2005).

Algeria, the Imazighen [i.e. the Berbers] have a very particular mode of functioning. Horizontal and circular, traditional Berber organization is opposed to the vertical and linear model of the West.<sup>16</sup> Several of her interviewees invoked this mode of organisation in reference to political organising in Montreal. In Berber culture, however, the circle does not really include women. However, CASS, just as it blurred the class lines between immigrants, refugees, and *sans-statuts*, also blurred the lines, without entirely effacing them, regarding which gender was allowed inside the circle.

The political movement on behalf of and led by the *sans-statuts*, then, was a movement that, at least more or less, presupposed the equality of anyone and everyone. It presupposed that everyone is equally capable of creating a meaningful life alongside others, and it challenged the police order of the Canadian state in the name of that equality. As Ranciere notes, ‘The essence of equality is not so much to unify as to declassify, to undo the supposed naturalness of orders and replace it with the controversial figures of division.’<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the presupposition of equality was not simply a challenge leveled against those who were not Algerians; it was a presupposition that infiltrated the movement itself. Class and gender distinctions were effaced, leadership was informal, meetings allowed everyone a space to participate.

Ranciere claims that one outcome of political action such as this is the creation of a subject, a process of what he calls *subjectification*. ‘By subjectification I mean the production through a series of actions of a body and a capacity for enunciation not previously identifiable within a given field of experience, whose identification is thus part of the reconfiguration of a field of experience.’<sup>18</sup> Subjectification as Ranciere

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<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>17</sup> Ranciere, Jacques. *On the Shores of Politics*, tr. Liz Heron. London: Verso, 1995 (or. pub. 1992), pp. 32–33.

<sup>18</sup> *Disagreement*, p. 35.



alongside them as equals during their meetings and demonstrations.

Moreover, this action out of the presupposition of equality concerned not only their relation to Canadian society. It also concerned their relations to one another, and on two levels. First, within the immigrant community, there are hierarchical distinctions created by immigrant status. Essentially, these fall into three levels. At the top are the regularised immigrants themselves. These are the people who have left, but not fled, Algeria, and have become citizens through the slow process of assimilation. Second, there are the refugees. They may attain citizenship, but, unlike other immigrants, they have the stigma of having fled their society. They are also sometimes associated with terrorism, a commonplace in contemporary society. Finally, at the bottom, are the *sans-statuts*. Mareschal points out that, in contrast to immigrants and refugees, the *sans-statuts* 'do not have the sense of liberation associated with refugees recognised by the Canadian state.'<sup>15</sup> During the events of 2002, these distinctions, while not entirely effaced, began at least to be blurred. As CASS became more successful and garnered more attention, immigrants and refugees who had previously hesitated to be associated with the *sans-statuts* became more openly supportive.

Not only were class distinctions among the Algerian and particularly Kabylean immigrants blurred, so were the gender distinctions so central to traditional Arab and Berber culture. Although it would be too much to claim that men and women were entirely equal in CASS, there were women among the leadership and in the ranks of the movement. One woman I spoke with, a supporter of CASS although not herself a *sans-statut*, said that there was a tendency at big events to have mostly male speakers, but that there were several women central to CASS's informal leadership. Mareschal notes that, 'In

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<sup>15</sup> Mareschal, *Pratiques citoyennes*, p. 107.

general criticisms of anarchism / libertarian positions but stays within the same general frame: Negri is not truly opposed to capitalist 'Empire' but instead romanticises the power of capitalism:

As is well known, for Negri, the Spinozist, there is only one historic substance, so that the capitalist empire is also the scene of an unprecedented communist deployment. This surely has the advantage of authorizing the belief that the worse it gets, the better it gets; or of getting you to (mis)take those demonstrations – fruitlessly convened to meet wherever the powerful re-unite – for the 'creation' and the 'multiform invention' of new petit-bourgeois proletarians (Badiou 2006: 45).

Therefore Negri cuts the ground from under any truly anti-capitalist politics by being overly fascinated with the mobile power of capital. At the same time he is also overly hopeful about the powers of resistance on this ground, offering only a 'dreamy hallucination' (Badiou 2003: 126) of the power of the 'multitude', which lacks the discipline to properly detach itself from the state.

Badiou's critique of anarchism ranges across a number of repeated and modulated criticisms. At the fundamental level it involves a constrained sense of the possibilities of politics that remains in a dualism of resistance versus power. This monolithic conception prevents a properly political assessment of the complex arrangements of political power and the means by which capitalist and state power might not only be resisted but also overthrown. This static dualism often leaves the origin of revolt unexplained or undetermined. It seems to come from nowhere and also to go nowhere; the 'miracle' of revolt is always doomed to defeat or recuperation. Also, this dualism leads to a structure of mirroring between anarchism and

state or capitalist power. The invocations of drift and liberation found in the libertarian current are dangerously close to the ideological forms of capitalism itself. For Badiou, this means that anarchism lacks the ability to ‘construct new forms of discipline to replace the discipline of political parties’ (Badiou 2003: 126). Of course anyone knowledgeable of the history of anarchism will recognise this line of criticism, particularly as it has often been advanced by Marxists. But it is the vehemence with which Badiou poses these questions in the present context, and his choice of theoretical targets that make them worth considering as critical questions – especially since, as we will see, some voices within the movement have arrived at similar conclusions.

## The Return of Strategy

Daniel Bensaid is rather more generous than Badiou when he credits the ‘neo-libertarian current’ – he has in mind Antonio Negri and John Holloway – with ‘relaunching a much-needed strategic debate in the movements of resistance to imperial globalisation’ (2005: 171). But instead of sorting through Badiou’s misapprehensions about anarchism, I want to consider how his reservations about strategy dovetail with discussions in the ‘movement of movements’. I will begin with Badiou’s argument that Negri, and the ‘movement of movements’, remain overly fascinated by and linked to state and capitalist power. In their text *Barbarians: disordered insurgency* (2004) the anarchists Chrissus and Odotheus provide a critique of Negri that is very close to the arguments of Badiou. Like Badiou they question whether Negri has really escaped the schemas of a teleological and mechanistic Marxism, in which the supposed ‘advance’ of capitalism will form the conditions for communism. While Negri hymns the power of the multitude – his name for the new dispersed but common subject of resistance

If this were all, then the movement of the *sans-statuts* would be simply a demand for recognition, like many other movements of its kind. There was more, though. The movement was led by the *sans-statuts* themselves. Soon after April 5, the *Comite d’action des sans-statut*, or CASS, a group led largely by *sans-statuts*, issued three demands: ending any deportations of *sans-statuts*, reinstating the moratorium, and regularising all *sans-statuts*. CASS was the centerpiece of the *sans-statut* movement. It was directed and led by *sans-statuts*. While it received much support from other organisations, such as the Canadian No One is Illegal and, eventually, mainstream organisations like Amnesty International,<sup>14</sup> CASS remained an organisation of *sans-statuts* and their supporters.

We must recognise the significance of this. At one level, we might say that the most vulnerable people of a society, those without any institutional support, engaged in an aggressive public campaign of meetings and demonstrations in order to press their case. This would be true, but it would also miss the central Rancierean point. The members of CASS did not act like refugees. They did not hide. They did not accept their status as marginal. Although they were, quite literally, a part of Canadian society that had no part, they did not accept the state’s refusal to give them a part. They acted out of the presupposition of their own equality. The public nature of their meetings and demonstrations were testimony to this. Although they had no status and no protection, and although they were under threat of imminent deportation, they acted as though none of this were true. In their demand for recognition, or, more specifically, for regularisation, they acted as though they were already Canadian citizens who enjoyed all the rights those citizens took for granted. And, indeed, many Canadians stood

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<sup>14</sup> Mareschal, Julie, ‘Orienter et reinventer ses pratiques citoyennes: le cas des immigrants et refugies Kabyles a Montreal,’ *Diversite urbaine*, Vol. 4, #1, Spring 2004, p. 6.

Of course, the mechanism for doing so is a vexed question in anarchist thought. Must every decision be made by consensus? What, if any, role does voting play? Ranciere has no light to shed on these matters. The point, rather, is that one might raise them to his thought in the same way that they emerge for anarchist thought. The presupposition of equality, which is the heart of a democratic politics, requires the respect for and recognition of every member of a political struggle.

With this sketch in hand, let's turn back to the movement of the *sans- statuts*. What happened in Montreal after the April 5 lifting of the moratorium on return? Some refugees, of course, fled the country or made arrangements for transfer to a third country. Some took their chances and accepted deportation back to Algeria. After all, the vulnerability of the *sans- statuts* gives them little or no leverage to negotiate with the government. Further, their isolation both politically and economically leaves them without resources to construct alternatives. However, most of them did not. The movement they formed, of which the May 12 meeting was an early example, was an attempt to call attention to their situation and the threat they faced. Moreover, the movement was not simply a plea. It was a demand for regularisation of papers and an end to deportation. During my interviews with several members of the movement, they were adamant that they were contributing members of Canadian society, and therefore deserved all the rights accorded to those who had Canadian papers. They pointed out that they came with education, skills, an ability to speak the language, and a desire to participate in the society in which they now found themselves. Nothing more could be asked of a citizen than that.<sup>13</sup>

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while for Ranciere any consensus occurs within the context of a dissensus from a given situation.

<sup>13</sup> Mareschal confirms this in her thesis. See esp., Chapter 5.

— Chrissus and Odotheus query how we can imagine that 'this being ... has power even when everything would seem to bear witness to the contrary' (Chrissus and Odotheus 2004: 17). They argue that Negri forms the left-wing of contemporary capitalism, supposing only reforms based on the supposed 'communist' power of the multitude.

Alongside this critique, we can also see other signs of the rejection of the tendency of the movement to mirror the power that it opposes. Recent discussions in the journal *Voices of Resistance from Occupied London*, subtitled the *Quarterly Anarchist Journal of Theory and Action from the British Capital after Empire*, raise the question of the limits of the counter-summit — precisely because it remains locked into shadowing the summits of those in power. The article 'For a Summit Against Everything' by the Comrades from Everywhere asks the question: 'Sure we need to meet — and our counter-summits are an excellent opportunity for doing so. But why follow them around in their summits, why give them the tactical advantage of selecting where and when our battles are to take place?' (2007: 44). Arguing for a new form of counter-summit, autonomously organised, they note: 'Rather than waiting for them to decide where and when to meet, no longer running behind them, we'll jump on the driver's seat and decide this for ourselves' (2007: 44). This suggests a strategic recognition not only of the successes of the anti-globalisation movement (which Badiou does not recognise), but also its failures or limitations. The limitation of the counter-summit is being answered with the proposal that a new independent and autonomous form of summit take place. Whether or not this is successful the suggestion implies the recognition of the problem that Badiou had earlier identified: whether 'anti-capitalist' politics finds itself mirrored in its own selfdefinition as a movement of opposition ('anti-'). One of the strategic questions posed to anarchism, or anarchist practice, will be its negotiation of this different form of autonomous

‘power’, especially in distinguishing itself from more usual ‘leftist’ or ‘radical’ forms of organisation or ‘counter-power’.

The second point to consider is Badiou’s claim that anarchism takes up a position of perpetual opposition without really believing or acting in such a way as to change the existing situation. The journal cum-newspaper *Turbulence* (2007), developed for reflection within the movement of movements, titled its first issue ‘What would it mean to win?’ Thus it posed to the movement the question Badiou suggested that libertarian or anarchist thought has tended to evade. What is interesting is that some of the articles in the issue do reflect a sense of crisis or failure in the movement that links to the problem of ‘organisation’, or the development of struggles. Ben Trott posits the need for ‘directional demands’, which ‘aim to produce a point around which a potential movement could consolidate’ (2007: 15). Similarly, the group The Free Association argue that what is required are ‘problematics’, shared problems that involve ‘acting and moving’ (2007: 26). The Argentinian group Colectivo Situaciones argues for the need to develop a ‘non-state institution of that which is collective’ (2007: 25). While it would obviously be foolish to take this as representative of ‘the movement’, even less as particularly anarchist, it is a sign that the problem of ‘winning’ seems to point to the fundamental criticism Badiou poses: how would anarchists go about achieving their desired egalitarian collective social forms?

To ‘win’ is, of course, not only a matter of proposing alternative social forms, but also of the *means* by which these might be achieved. Of course this problem arises in part because Marxist or ‘leftist’ critics often cannot identify what anarchist practice does as having ‘real’ effects because it does not conform to their idea of what politics is or should be. Anarchist thought and practice has always been concerned with the critique of politics, as the separation of one realm of human activity from all others and a separation which helps create an expert political class and professional politicians or militants. That said, as

The closest relative to Ranciere’s thought is, in my view, anarchism. In contrast to many recent contemporary French thinkers, Ranciere does not shy away from the comparison. In fact, in a recent text, he invokes the terms several times. ‘Democracy first of all means this: anarchic “government”, one based on nothing other than the absence of every title to govern.’<sup>11</sup> For Ranciere, equality as the presupposition of political action is nothing other than a collective activity where every member of that activity presupposes himself or herself to be the equal of every other member. This does not require that everyone be doing the same thing. It does require, however, that everyone recognise not only their equality with those who think them less than equal, those who oppress them, but also with those alongside whom they struggle.

This issues out into at least two characteristics that are bedrock commitments of anarchism. The first is a rejection of avant-gardism. If everyone is equal, then there is no reason that some should act as the permanent guide for others. There may be distinctions among specific skills of the participants, but any distinction along this line does not confer a special status on everyone. The rejection of avant-gardism would hardly be foreign to Ranciere’s thought. In fact, it is the source of his own abandonment of Althusserian Marxism.

The second characteristic, one which flows from Ranciere’s thought but which he never addresses, is related to the first: the importance of process in political action. To reject avant-gardism is to recognise the equality of political participants. And to do so requires that the process of political decision-making be such that everyone’s view is taken into account.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ranciere, Jacques. *Hatred of Democracy*, tr. Steve Corcoran. London: Verso, 2006 (or. pub. 2005), p. 41.

<sup>12</sup> This may sound like a variant of Habermas’ thought that was just rejected as having real affinities with Ranciere’s. However, it should be recalled that for Habermas the consensus model is to be applied outside a particular situation in order to generate the normative principles of that situation,

those principles are decided. On the contrary, it *begins* within the context of a society that is operating on particular distributive principles. Politics is something that people do; it is not a set of principles characterising what people receive. In that sense, Ranciere inverts the traditional view of equality. Equality is not a matter of what people should receive, nor is it a characterisation of the situation that decides the principles of what people should receive. It is a characterisation of how people act, of what they do. Equality is not a principle of receptivity or passivity; it is a principle of activity.

This approach might seem to bring Ranciere's thought closer to that of Habermas, for whom the principles of a society should not be the result of a theoretical contract, but of an actual discussion among participants.<sup>9</sup> For Habermas, the veil of ignorance and its theoretically generated principles is too abstract. What is required for an adequate social contract is a procedure of decision-making that actually requires the participation of the signatories to that contract. While the specifics of Habermas' proposal are wide of our concerns here, we can already see what distinguishes Habermas from Ranciere. It is not the questions of distribution. For Habermas, people in the position of deciding the normative principles in a society may in fact not settle on distributive principles. Rather, what distinguishes them is that Habermas is seeking a consensus among participants in a discussion. Ranciere, by contrast, is articulating a dissensus from a given police order. 'The essence of politics is a *dissensus*,' he writes, explaining that 'Dissensus is not the confrontation between interests or opinions. It is the manifestation of a distance of the sensible from itself'.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Habermas' critique of Rawls, 'Reconciliation Through the Public use of Reason: Remarks on John Rawls's Political Liberalism,' *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 92, No. 3. (Mar., 1995), pp. 109–131.

<sup>10</sup> 'Ten Theses on Politics,' *Theory and Event*, Vol. 5, #3, 2001, p. 12.

the 'movement of movements' starts to look beyond the limits of the counter-summit it begins to encounter the problem of strategy and practice outside of the 'mass' protest or 'temporary autonomous zone'.

Although not coming from an anarchist position, but rather from the tradition of post-autonomist thinking, Sandro Mezzadra and Gigi Roggero raise the problem of organisation directly in their article in *Turbulence*. They point to the difficulty that the 'movement of movements' has had in intervening in relations of production and that there is a danger of simply repeating statements concerning the exhaustion of the party form and the promotion of the new form of the network. Taking the case of EuroMayDay, they point out that although it posed problems, especially concerning migration, and transmitted 'explosive images', it 'did not did not manage to generate common forms of organisation and praxis' (2007: 8). This raises the question of the relation of *movements to institutions* — not only in terms of existing institutions but also in terms of the creation of new institutions (Mezzadra and Roggero 2007: 9). In particular they consider the case of what they call 'laboratory Latin America': the multiplicity of movements and institutions emerging in a range of countries, especially Venezuela. That complex situation offers some insights about how we might form a space in common and how we might answer the question: 'how can one employ the relations of power without 'taking power'?' (2007: 9).<sup>3</sup>

We should note that the wider 'left' does not speak with a unified voice on these matters; nor has it promoted any successful solutions even in terms of its own models of 'revolution' or 'reform'. At the moment the struggle is to find a way between

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<sup>3</sup> If we want a more anarchist opinion on the situation in Venezuela we can turn to the work of *El Libertario*, the voice of the Comision de Relaciones Anarquistas (CRA) of Venezuela. I would refer the reader to their website, which has an English language section, to gain a fuller picture. See <http://www.nodo50.org/ellibertario/english.html>.

what seems like a sterile opposition: between ‘changing the world without taking power’ (as suggested by John Holloway) and ‘taking power to change the world’ (a more ‘traditional’ left position). Anarchist sympathies rest with the first ‘option’. But if anarchists are to answer the type of criticism posed by Badiou and acknowledge the limits currently being experienced by the ‘movement of movements’, the implication appears to be the need for new strategic thinking that can engage with and against power to make a new world.

## Conclusion: the Time of Theory

We may seem to have wandered far from our starting point concerning postanarchism and Badiou’s critique of anarchism. However, the advantage of considering Badiou’s criticisms of anarchism is that has pushed us towards reposing issues around postanarchism in terms of the relation of theory to practice (to use an unfortunate binary). That debate has often been a sterile one: with activists bemoaning the inactivity and mystification of ‘theory’, and theorists criticising the supposed naivety of activists. It would be difficult enough to settle such matters in what is, after all, a work of theoretical reflection. However, we can say that Badiou’s work poses important questions about revolutionary change and his criticisms of anarchism allow us to sharpen what anarchist thought and practice might have to offer and what resources it might have to develop. It also requires that we interrogate the alternative models of anarchist practice that have often been linked to postanarchist thinking, such as the network or the temporary autonomous zone. While these forms aim to escape the supposed limits of ‘traditional’ or ‘humanist’ models of anarchist practice we have to be aware that concepts like the ‘network’ are hardly politically neutral. In fact, the ‘network’ model has been a central legitimating trope for many forms

rules for distributing the goods of a society must be impartially decided. And yet people tend to look from the perspective of their own interest. Therefore, by placing people behind what he calls a ‘veil of ignorance,’ where they can create whatever distributive principles they like, but without knowing what place they will occupy in the society, people are forced to pick impartial rules.

On the surface, contractarian theory seems to have affinities with Ranciere’s approach to politics. After all, don’t both operate from the presupposition of equality? In the case of contractarianism, all parties to the contract start from a position of equality. And with Rawls in particular, every possible position one might occupy in society is taken into account, since the person who chooses the principles of the society might wind up in any of them.

These surface affinities are deceiving. It is not that there is no egalitarianism in contractarian theory. There is. What distinguishes contractarianism from Ranciere’s vision of politics is the role that equality plays in each. Contractarianism is a type of distributive theory of justice. It asks the question of how the benefits and burdens of a society should be distributed. Those who decide the principles of distribution are equal. But when those principles are decided, everything changes. At the very least, there are the distributors and the distributees: in most cases, the distributor is the state and the distributees are the citizens. Rawls is very explicit about this. He writes, ‘A just scheme, then, answers to what men are entitled to; it satisfies their legitimate expectations as founded upon social institutions.’<sup>8</sup> Justice is what people are entitled to expect from the social institutions under which they find themselves.

For Ranciere, decisions about principles of distribution are matters of policing, not politics. Politics does not end when

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<sup>8</sup> Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971, p. 311.

not to commend one police order as better than another. It is to challenge the concept of partitioning itself. The presupposition of equality does not work by offering a stabilising set of equal roles for everyone to play; it works by undermining the hierarchies inherent in the very idea of a stabilising set of roles.

I ... propose to reserve the term *politics* for an extremely determined activity antagonistic to policing: whatever breaks with the tangible configuration whereby parties and parts or lack of them are defined by a presupposition that, by definition, has no place in that configuration – that of the part that has no part. political activity is always a mode of expression that undoes the perceptible divisions of the police order by implementing a basically heterogeneous assumption, that of the part who have no part, an assumption that, at the end of the day, itself demonstrates the contingency of the order, the equality of any speaking being with any other speaking being.<sup>7</sup>

Ranciere's approach to politics is a radical one. It diverges from mainstream liberal politics as well as the critical theory of Jurgen Habermas; its affinities lie, if anywhere, with anarchist thought. Regarding liberal theories, the dominant mainstream theoretical perspective is contractarianism. Under contractarianism, whose modern roots lie with the seventeenth century philosopher Thomas Hobbes, the just rules of a political order are those that would be chosen by rational members of that order. For Hobbes, of course, the rules are simply those that prevent the chaos and disaster of a state of nature. For a more recent thinker like John Rawls, the contract is that which would be chosen by rational thinkers who do not know what place they are to occupy in the society. Rawls argues that the fair

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<sup>7</sup> *Disagreement*, p. 29–30.

of contemporary capitalist work practice and activity. While much is made of the 'paradigm shift' to postanarchism for facing up to the contemporary realities of power, much more work needs to be done in cashing out the implications for practice.

As Badiou notes even the category of 'movement' is problematic, 'because this category is itself coupled to the logic of the state' (2003: 126). The very right to movement is one that is dominated by the state and capitalism and the question becomes whether it can be wrested from this logic or whether it must, as Badiou indicates, be abandoned. The journal *Turbulence* chose its name to indicate the re-interpretation in movement terms of non-linear dynamics, popularly known as 'chaos theory'. While the emphasis on instability and chaotic flow may appear congruent with anarchist or libertarian modes of life, we have to note the ambiguity in which capitalism and the state also deploy such logics. Israeli Defence Force theorists have shown an interest in the ideas of Deleuze and Guattari and chaos theory to create non-hierarchical, non-linear, tactics of 'swarming' as a mode of military intervention (see Weizman 2007: 185218). The new doctrines of the American military have shown a parallel interest in borrowing from the models of non-hierarchical activism to develop a flexible battlefield response to the chaos of war (Monk 2007). Our enemies are learning from us.

This kind of recuperation is nothing new, and it does not simply imply abandoning such tactics for hierarchical forms. It does suggest that anarchist practice must find new inventive ways to engage with such problems, rather than simply invoke concepts like 'movement' or 'network' as a mantra. In the text 'The Call' (2007) the French group La Rage write, '[a]ll in all, we would rather start from small and dense nuclei than from a vast and loose network. We have known these spineless arrangements long enough.' This suggests a felt need to re-think fundamental concepts of strategy to answer the problem posed

by Daniel Bensaid: ‘In the end no crisis has ever turned out well from the point of view of the oppressed without resolute intervention by a political force (whether you call it a party or a movement) carrying a project forward and capable of taking decisions and decisive initiatives’ (2005: 180). Of course this way of putting things already loads the dice against anarchist practice, but then we will have to re-think what is meant by ‘resolute intervention’ outside of hierarchical arrangements, or of what Badiou calls ‘discipline’ outside of connotations of sacrifice and repression.

The very bluntness of Badiou’s criticisms, which lumps in ‘postanarchist’ currents with ‘traditional’ anarchism, suggests that these matters are far from being resolved. This is not simply a question of theoretical mastery, i.e. the idea that once we have discovered the correct theoretical orientation then our political practice will smoothly unfold from it. Instead we might recognise what Guy Debord usefully stated:

But theories are only made to die in the war of time. Like military units, they must be sent into battle at the right moment; and whatever their merits or insufficiencies, they can only be used if they are on hand when they’re needed. They have to be replaced because they are constantly being rendered obsolete — by their decisive victories even more than by their partial defeats. Moreover, no vital eras were ever engendered by a theory; they began with a game, or a conflict, or a journey (2003: 151).

While anarchists might object to the military metaphor the point is, I think, a valid and useful one. It suggests, and this has been one of the merits of anarchist thinking, the need for critical revision and suppleness in thought and practice, rather than the proclaiming of theory as a dogmatic truth. Rather than beginning with a theory, postanarchist or otherwise, we might better begin with ‘a game, or a conflict, or a journey’.

do manual work. There are those who contribute to the public space and those who are relegated to the private sphere. And, in the end, there are those who have a part to play in forming and deciding the character of a given society — those who count and whose views are counted — and those who do not. Ranciere calls this social ordering the ‘police’:

Politics is generally seen as the set of procedures whereby the aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organization of powers, the distribution of place and roles, and the systems for legitimising this distribution. I propose to give this system of distribution another name. I propose to call it *the police*.<sup>6</sup>

The idea here is that social space is partitioned into specific roles that reflect a variety of presupposed inequalities, and that partitioning is policed (and often self-policed) in order to sustain the partitions.

Given this picture of social arrangements, much of what is called ‘politics’ in everyday language is, for Ranciere, not really politics but merely more humane or more efficient policing. For instance, to subsidise the poor with welfare payments is still policing, since it retains the partitioning of social space as it is. There is no challenge to the partitioning itself, merely a blunting of some of its more deleterious effects. This is not to say subsidising the poor is not better than not subsidising them. It is to keep alive the distinction between policing and real politics.

Politics begins with the challenge to the police order in the name of equality. Here is where the radical nature of Ranciere’s thought begins to emerge. Equality, in challenging hierarchies, does not seek to offer another, better social partitioning than the one that is the object of challenge. To engage in politics is

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<sup>6</sup> *Disagreement*, p.28.



then turn to the question of how it bears upon the character of the movement of the *sans-statuts*.

We must ask, of course, what it is to act out of equality? But preliminary to that, we must ask what kind of equality is to be presupposed? If people are to act out of the presupposition of equality, what exactly is the equality out of which they act? Here Ranciere's answer may seem surprising. The equality out of which they act is the equality of intelligence.

When Ranciere writes of the equality of intelligence, he does not mean that we are equally capable of scoring the same on SAT exams or getting the same scholastic grades (although he does argue that we are all much more capable of that than current social arrangements might lead us to believe). He does not mean that we can all understand advanced quantum theory. What he is after is more pedestrian. We can all talk to one another, reason with one another, and construct meaningful lives on the basis of this reasoning and our own reflections. While our specific intellectual skills may differ from one another, we are all equally capable of using those skills to communicate, to discuss, to make decisions, to take account of the world around us, and to act on the basis of all this. The presupposition of the equality of intelligence is the starting point for all politics. '[O]ur problem,' he writes, 'isn't proving that all intelligence is equal. It's seeing what can be done under that supposition. And for this, it's enough for us that the opinion be possible — that is, that no opposing truth be proved.'<sup>5</sup>

The obstacle, of course, is that societies are not arranged on the presupposition of equality. In fact, they are arranged on the opposite presupposition. Social arrangements fall into various hierarchies of inequality. There are those who make decisions governing the lives of others and those who are governed. There are those who do intellectual work and those who

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<sup>5</sup> Ranciere, Jacques. *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, tr. Kristin Ross. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991 (or. pub. 1987), p. 46.

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oneself within the social cracks rather than to confront openly the forces that oppress one. The latter course is usually an invitation to deportation.

It is what happened after the lifting of the moratorium on deportation that gives the story of Montreal’s Algerian *sans-statuts* its interest, both as a political lesson and as a philosophical one. It is a lesson that could be drawn from the pages of French theorist Jacques Ranciere, whose writings on politics form a background against which we shall read the movement.

For Ranciere, politics concerns action that emerges from a framework of equality. Equality is not something that is distributed, and it is not something that people receive, as it is in traditional theories of justice. Equality, instead, is a *presupposition* of those who act on their own behalf. Otherwise put, people act, not in order to achieve equality, but out of the presupposition of their equality to others, and most often to those who consider them their inferiors. As Ranciere puts the point: ‘Equality is not a given that politics then presses into service, an essence embodied in the law or a goal politics sets itself the task of attaining. It is a mere assumption that needs to be discerned within the practices implementing it.’<sup>4</sup>

Ranciere’s intellectual itinerary started when he was a student of Althusser’s, but then broke with his teacher in the wake of May ’68. Among other disagreements, Ranciere found Althusser’s commitment to a division of labour between the intellectuals and workers to be a violation of his commitment to radical equality. In a series of works over the course of the early to mid-1990s, Ranciere developed a framework for thinking equality, before moving more recently into the area of intersection between politics and aesthetics. I would like to offer a brief sketch of Ranciere’s view of the politics of equality and

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<sup>4</sup> Ranciere, Jacques. *Disagreement*, tr. Julie Rose. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999 (or. pub. 1995), p. 33.

that permitted even those who had been refused asylum to remain in Canada. They had no papers, no formal status. In France they would be called the *sans-papiers*. In Canada, they were the *sans-statuts*, the difference being that the former often did not apply for papers, while the latter had applied for refugee status and were refused. Unlike the *sans-papiers*, they were entitled to limited access to health care, welfare, and a right to work; but they had no formal legal standing and were vulnerable to deportation at any time.

If the violence of the Algerian civil war remained, why was the moratorium on returning refused refugees lifted? A month before the lifting of the moratorium, Prime Minister Jean Chretien made a state visit to Algeria. He had been under pressure from Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika to lift the moratorium, since it was an embarrassment to the Algerian state. Soon after Chretien's return to Canada, immigration minister Coderre announced that the violence in Algeria had diminished and that it was safe for the *sans-statuts* to return. It is perhaps worth mentioning, at least in passing, that the following month, May 2002, the Canadian company SNC Lavalin, an engineering and construction giant, signed a contract with the Algerian government worth an estimated 141 million dollars. For reasons that may or may not have something to do with economics, then, the Canadian government was willing to return a thousand people to a war zone in which their lives would be at risk, especially since each of the refused, Amel and Riyad among them, would be marked for slaughter.

The story we have related so far is not an unfamiliar one. Countries deal with refugees and other potential immigrants on the basis of state selfinterest rather than the stakes of those who seek refuge or work. We in the US have recently witnessed this with the debate on illegal immigration. Those who are vulnerable, are political pawns. And because they are vulnerable, they rarely act in solidarity with others, and rarely act publicly. It is often best, if one is alone and without protection, to install

## Equality Among the Refugees: A Ranciorean view of Montreal's Sans-Status Algerians

TODD MAY

### Abstract

The political status and movements of refugees and *sans-papiers* has become a focal point for French political thought, but also more universally in the wake of globalisation. We have witnessed the issue here in the US in the debate over immigration. In France, Alain Badiou's *Organisation Politique*, for instance, has coined the phrase, in regard to France's *sans-papiers*, 'all those who are here are from here.' However, if we follow closely the events of 2002 and after among the Algerian refugees of Montreal, what emerges is a case study in politics as conceived by Jacques Ranciere.

This paper details both the movement and its implicitly Ranciorean underpinnings. I will include an overview of Ranciere's political thought. What is attempted in this paper, as part of a larger project that will examine other contemporary political movements, is to show how a politics can look in our world, and thus to begin to efface the line that is often drawn between political theory and political activism.

On May 12, 2002, three or four dozen people gathered in a small hall in Montreal. They heard several speakers discuss the recent years of their lives. One of those speakers was a young woman named Amel, who had three children. She had arrived in Montreal in 1999, during the height of the Algerian civil war. Like thousands of other Algerians, she had asked for refugee status. She explained to the gathering that, 'I had two addresses in Blida, two of my children were born in Algiers. I lived in Blida but my passport was issued in Algiers. This sufficed to convince them [the immigration commission] to refuse me refugee status.'<sup>1</sup> Another refugee, Ryad, had vowed never to leave Algeria, but finally did after he received five bullet wounds as he was leaving his house one day in Algeria. His crime was that of being the brother of someone who wrote pamphlets denouncing the Islamic fundamentalists. He had also been refused asylum, and therefore was among the thousand or so Algerians living in Montreal who had the status of *sans-statut*; that is, the status of no status.

Why were these people gathered here on this particular evening? The May 12 meeting was called in response to an announcement that, except for what happened after May 12, would have gone largely unnoticed among the Canadian people. A month earlier, on April 5, the Canadian minister of immigration, Denis Coderre, had lifted a moratorium on deporting Algerians refused asylum or immigrant status that had been in place since 1997. The original moratorium had itself been enacted in response to the continuing violence of Algeria's civil war, a violence that had eventually claimed the lives of over 150,000 Algerians.

The civil war, which is not entirely over yet, had begun in 1992, when the first round of national election results indicated that the likely winner was the Islamic Salvation Front, the FIS. The army, composed of members of the resistance move-

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<sup>1</sup> *Alfa*, # 46, May, 2002, p. 13. All translations from the French are mine.

ment against the French occupation that lasted until 1962, cancelled the election and proceeded to govern without an electoral mandate. At that point, the FIS took up arms and began killing government officials, and then civilians, and eventually massacring whole villages. The government's response, if not equally brutal, was certainly brutal enough.<sup>2</sup> Caught in the middle of this civil war was the Berber population, descendents of the people who lived in Algeria before the arrival of Islam and the Arabic-speaking population. The Berbers, sometimes called Kabylis because of the region in Algeria where many of them are concentrated, were often targeted by both sides. Although they were not the subject of some of the most notorious massacres, they were often targeted because they were active in their own self-defense from early on in the civil war. They formed a large percentage of the refugees that came to Canada.

But why Canada? In her 2003 thesis Julie Mareschal, who studied the Berber refugee movement, explained that there were three reasons.<sup>3</sup> First, it was far away from Algeria. It seemed the civil war would not follow them there. Second, Montreal is francophone, and, since the French occupation, French has become the second language of Algeria. Finally, compared with France itself, it was easier to obtain refugee status in Canada. The upshot of all this is that during the Algerian civil war Canada was the favoured country for Algerian refugees in general and Berber refugees in particular. Canada had responded to this influx with a protective measure in 1997

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<sup>2</sup> There are a number of histories of the Algerian civil war. One of the most comprehensive, *The Algerian Civil War, 1990–1998*, was written under the pseudonym of Luis Martinez (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000, or. pub. 1998). His particular thesis, that the war was a product of a military *imaginaire* directed at the social advancement of the actors in the struggle, has affinities with the social theories of Pierre Bourdieu. That point is beyond our concerns here.

<sup>3</sup> Mareschal, Julie. *Pratiques citoyennes des immigrants et réfugiés kabyles à Montréal*. Québec: Université Laval, 2003.

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to logicians. There are a multiplicity of different logics, which have distinctive semantics, syntaxes and axioms: from the binary classical logics to the many-valued intuitionist logics, plus modal logics, temporal (linear and circular) logics, fuzzy logics and the numerous variations and cross-pollinations of these. It is curious that reason is assumed to be singular.

Rejection of a singular account of *logos* does not necessarily mean embracing irrationalism, though some poststructuralists might occasionally slip into such an incoherent and facile position. An alternative is to recognise that social practices and forms of knowledge have their own logics, which may overlap. The underlying rules that govern the discursive features of these practices are largely stable although contestable and changeable.<sup>70</sup> Rather than adopt irrationality or rely upon a single *logos*, reason is regarded as contextual, being generated by and supportive of, the social practices or traditions of which it is a part. Whilst the axioms of classical logic are likely to be stable features of most established social practices, this does not mean they are universal. Even logicians identify that the axioms of classical logic do not apply in each and every domain of human social enquiry – such as sub-atomic particle physics. It would seem to misunderstand romantic attachment if it was expected that love was only meaningfully expressed in the form of (for example) the syllogism or propositional formula.

## 5. Against Subjectivism

Stirner and Newman, against the dangerous hierarchical and oppressive account of morality offered by the universalists, propose in its place a form of subjectivism. The individual is freed from the constraints of universal laws to create their

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<sup>70</sup> Call comes close to this account in his description and endorsement of Derrida's critique of a single universal reason (*logos*), Call, 2002: 71.

own morality. However, whilst the critique of universalism is convincing, there are problems with this proposed subjectivist solution. The belief that the individual (or individual consciousness) is the fundamental basis for the construction of, and justification for, moral values has a number of fatal flaws for an anarchist or any proponent of meaningful social action: 1) that it is fundamentally solipsistic, denying dialogue and discourse and the possibility of moral evaluation; 2) it recreates social hierarchies of the form rejected by the core principles of anarchism; and 3) that Stirner's own meta-ethical account is epistemologically unsound as it ignores its own social construction.

### 5.1 Disempowerment: Solipsism

Stirner's critique of moral realism, however, is replaced by a commitment to the self as the sole and ultimate source of moral knowledge. Stirner posits a radical individualism, with the self creating its own values: 'If it is right for me therefore it is right'.<sup>71</sup> Newman stresses that Stirner's 'self' is not the fixed, rational accumulating ego of deontological ethics; it is one which is in constant flux, making and remaking itself.<sup>72</sup> This is because any description is bound to be incomplete because the creativity and subversiveness of the ego can undermine or transform any definition.<sup>73</sup>

However, it is only this self, abstracted from any social commitments or prior concerns, which is the source of moral knowledge. It alone decides what constitutes moral action, and it decides on its own terms. 'I am the creative nothing, the nothing out of which I myself as creator create everything'.<sup>74</sup> Thus, Stirner's ego can legitimise theft or any other action that the ego at that moment requires to fulfil its temporary project.

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<sup>71</sup> Stirner, 1993: 191.

<sup>72</sup> Newman, 2001: 67–68.

<sup>73</sup> Stirner, 1993: 366.

<sup>74</sup> Stirner, 1993: 5.

So too, for Call, Nietzsche's creative subject constructs its own laws and values.<sup>75</sup> There can be no external challenge to it from outside, as the self is the ultimate source, and arbiter, of moral knowledge. This would foreclose all debate and mean that no values could be challenged. But clearly anarchists do have meaningful ethical debate, and this requires a shared moral discourse that can evaluate and select between rival tactical options.

## 5.2 Recreation of Hierarchy

The Stirnerite postanarchists like Call and Newman rightly identify how the claim to be acting on behalf of abstract universal values provides the grounds for coercively imposing practices onto (less powerful) others.<sup>76</sup> However, a criticism raised by universalist theorists like McLaughlin is that Stirner's anarchism recreates social hierarchies, in which the only morally worthwhile entity is the egoist. Even in the voluntary union of egoists, the *other* has no external status and can be used instrumentally according to one's power.<sup>77</sup> If the universalist criticism of Stirner's subjectivism is correct, then this recreation of social hierarchies constitutes a rejection of one of the core principles of anarchism. There are two grounds for this criticism, one largely defended by Newman, the other less easily accommodated.

The first is that this account of Stirner views him as proposing a Hobbesian 'ego' selfishly pursuing its own interests without regard to others. This account seems consistent with McLaughlin's criticism of Stirner. There are certainly

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<sup>75</sup> Call, 2002: 51.

<sup>76</sup> Call, 2002: 49 and 55; Newman, 2001: 61.

<sup>77</sup> McLaughlin, 2007: 154.

textual references that support such an interpretation.<sup>78</sup> Newman, who identifies this line of criticism within Clark's older scholarly study,<sup>79</sup> provides a defence.<sup>80</sup> Newman replies that Stirner's project concerns individual liberation from the tyranny of others and the fixing of one's identity to set ideas rather than the subjugation of the less powerful to the dictates of the powerful ego.<sup>81</sup>

However, this response, which is not entirely consistent with Stirner's writings,<sup>82</sup> is a more persuasive and interesting argument. It does, however, give rise to a second criticism: that Stirner creates a binary divide between the liberated ego with whom one can have temporary union on one side and, on the other, the common herd. By concentrating on the development of the individual subject's own development (or 'becoming') it ignores, as Frank H. Brooks identifies, the situation of the unenlightened subject. It thus creates a hierarchy of enlightened egos who can and should act for themselves and the rest: the benighted masses.<sup>83</sup>

### 5.3 Epistemological Problems

Stirner's critique interests Newman precisely because it opens up space for the creative ego, one unconstrained by a

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<sup>78</sup> For instance: 'Let me say to myself, that what my might reaches to is my property; and let me claim as property everything that I feel strong enough to attain ... Here egoism, selfishness, must decide' (Stirner, 1993: 257).

<sup>79</sup> Clark argues that by prioritising the individual's own values Stirner 'still exalts the will to dominate, and still accepts the authoritarian consciousness'. (Clark, 1976: 94).

<sup>80</sup> Newman, 2001: 71; Clark, 1976.

<sup>81</sup> Newman, 2001: 71.

<sup>82</sup> See for instance Stirner's rejection of state-imposed equality for relationships in which others become 'my property, my creatures'. (Stirner, 1993: 179).

<sup>83</sup> F. Brooks, 'American Individualist Anarchism: What it was and why it failed', *The Journal of Political Ideologies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1996), 85.



single set place within the social order.<sup>84</sup> However, Stirner's critique does not just provide room for a critical consciousness, but also denies it has any place within the social order, as nothing substantive exists beyond the ego. It is this universal abstraction of the ego from the social context that is subjected to one of the oldest assaults on Stirner, in the voluminous polemic by Karl Marx in *The German Ideology*. Marx ridicules both the form of the argument, which he claims is based on the fallacious shift of the quantifier,<sup>85</sup> as well as the conclusion that the ego and the concepts it develops can be divorced from the social circumstances in which they arise.<sup>86</sup>

The central liberatory feature of Stirner's critique is, oddly, one compatible with Marx: that the individual should be free to develop, creating and recreating itself, according to their desires. But this, as Marx recognises, requires material resources. As Paul Thomas points out in his review of Marx's critique of Stirner, a person can only freely create themselves – for instance, to use Marx's example – as a 'cattle-rearer' or a 'critic' if there are the social institutions (without bourgeois divisions of labour) that allow the individual to pursue these fluid, temporary goals.<sup>87</sup>

An individual, and their critical consciousness, is built out of social resources.<sup>88</sup> As Stirner identifies, the ego requires the social resources of language in which to reinvent itself, and to think of itself anew, but in doing so, becomes a *subject* of language.

I can only make use of *human* means, which are  
at my command because I am at the same time

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<sup>84</sup> Newman, 2001: 71–72.

<sup>85</sup> K. Marx, *The German Ideology* (Moscow, USSR: Progress, 1976), 295–97.

<sup>86</sup> Marx, 1976: 305–08.

<sup>87</sup> P. Thomas, *Karl Marx and the Anarchists* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), 148–49; Marx, 1976: 53.

<sup>88</sup> Marx, 1976: 231.

man. And really I have thoughts only as *man*; as I, I am at the same time *thoughtless*. He who cannot get rid of thought is so far *only* man, is a thrall of language, this human institution, this treasury of *human* thoughts. Language or ‘the word’ tyrannizes hardest over us, because it brings up against a whole army of fixed ideas.<sup>89</sup>

To express his radical subjectivism, Stirner requires intersubjective resources, such as language and institutions such as publishers and readership. To transcend the restrictions of existing modes of thought or existing social practices Stirner needs both to recognise their limits, and the materials they provide — though this ultimately produces new institutions. Thus, the individual cannot be wholly abstracted out of his social context in the manner required for Stirner’s subjectivism to be consistent.

## 6. An Alternative to Subjectivism

The alternative to the radical subjectivism of Stirner must not only avoid those features of egoism which make it internally inconsistent or irreconcilable with a meaningful anti-hierarchical political practice, but must also keep those elements of the subjectivist critique that identify the oppressive features of moral universalism. Whilst a comprehensive account of such an alternative is impossible in the limited space remaining, a brief sketch can be presented and at least some initial assessment of whether these features are mutually compatible.

One alternative is a prefigurative or practical anarchism, based on a social account of the virtues (based on a revision

PRI is. Lastly, it is frustrating that an author discussing one of the supreme political orators of our age is so ham-fisted in his own choice of words. Talking about the twin effects of the Tiananmen Square massacre in China and the collapse of the Soviet Union, Henck writes: ‘Certainly, not everything was all doom and gloom in the EZLN camp’ (p.125). On Marcos’s psychology: Henck finds a ‘not inconsiderable ego’ (p.227) — the ‘Sub’ reduced to a Majorism!

We are left with a work which is not exactly a biography and not exactly a study of political culture. A not un-frustrating work.

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<sup>89</sup> Stirner, 1993: 345–46.

his book thus: 'My purpose throughout is not to judge Marcos, to condemn or to condone his actions, but rather to try to comprehend and contextualize him' (p.9). While *Subcommander Marcos* is certainly an informative and interesting work, it is doubtful whether Henck has genuinely succeeded in these aims.

In one sense, this is a book which cannot fail, a publisher's dream. The varied strands of this story, both its fact and fiction, form an epic by which no-one could remain unmoved. Henck translates and reproduces some of Marcos's exceptional, eloquent, witty prose: a body of work which is sufficient to guarantee him a place as one of humanity's great political writers. Henck's analysis of Marcos's own development from a Maoist-tinged guerrilla strategy to a quite separate and arguably unique form of libertarian socialism is clear and convincing, and his narrative of the EZLN's inception and development is certainly adequate. However, there are some larger problems. Even at the end of this work, Marcos still remains curiously anonymous: Henck states that he preferred *not* to interview Marcos, for he knew that the Sub's words would only confuse him. But if, in a sense, the 'real' Marcos is 'not available' for interview, then what is the point of a biography of this man? On wider political issues, the work has some weaknesses. Henck makes a reasonable job of tracing the varied influences of Maoism, Guevarism and radical Catholicism, but he is weaker on indigenous political cultures: while social surveys and statistical information are offered, we never quite understand what makes these people choose to rebel. More frustratingly, Henck's work seems to have badly edited. For example, in the first forty pages, we are given much information about Marcos's relationship with the FLN, but we are never told what the FLN is. (The book's glossary explains that it is the Fuerzas de Liberacion Nacional – very useful!) On p.60 Henck discusses the PRI's role in spreading political corruption in Mexico, but never explains what the

of MacIntyre's virtue theory). This identifies goods as being inherent to social practices,<sup>90</sup> which have their own rules, which are negotiable and alter over time.<sup>91</sup> It stresses the immanent values of particular practices rather than the externally decided (consequentialist) values that will accrue.

Thus, those tactics which are consistent with anarchism are those that are rewarding in their own terms rather than on the basis of external benefits alone. The different approaches to political-social organisation provide an illustration, in which Leninism exemplifies the instrumental approach, whilst a case from contemporary anarchism provides a contrast. Leninism concentrates on the external goods of the disciplined party, its success is primarily judged on its efficiency in reaching the desired goal of revolution.<sup>92</sup> However, a different non-consequentialist approach to political organisation is to view political structures as the manifestation of internal goods, such as enhancing wisdom and the embodiment of social relationships that disperse social power.<sup>93</sup> Standards are generated by, and help to form, anti-hierarchical social practices. For instance the norms required for secretly subverting corporate advertising or state propaganda are not identical to those required to maintain an inclusive, multi-functional social centre. Whilst different, the norms of both are open to those entering these practices; they are open to critical dialogue and can alter over time.

Each anarchist practice produces their own standards, which overlap with others. The norms by which a success-

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<sup>90</sup> MacIntyre, 2006: 187–88.

<sup>91</sup> MacIntyre, 2006: 190–91.

<sup>92</sup> See for instance V I. Lenin, *What is to be Done?* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963): 149.

<sup>93</sup> See for instance many of the methods discussed by the Trapeze Collective, *Do it Yourself: A handbook for changing our world* (London: Pluto, 2007), which not only promote productive, social goals, but which are internally rewarding, as they produce creative dialogues, amusement and expand knowledge and skills.

ful social centre is run will be different to, but bear some similarities with, an inclusive, participatory website or periodical. Thus the standards for the goods, the types of social relationship that constitute (and are constituted by) non- or anti-hierarchical practice are observable and assessable within a domain – and between adjacent domains. So that the relatively stable, and common, norms of bravery (opposing dominating power), solidarity (reciprocal assistance between those in a subjugated position) and wisdom (coming to understand the structures of oppression and the means by which ‘other values’ can be created) are identifiable within anarchist practices, but are not necessarily universal. Similar practices involving subtly different actors will generate distinctive other goods (or bads).

Like the Stirnerite subject, there is no universal agent of change, but one in constant flux, resisting, challenging or fleeing the changing dominating powers within a given context. Within these radical practices, the subject produces its own immanent values. Because social practices are not distinct but overlap, there are possibilities for links of solidarity across the different domains between different agents, although there is no universal agent who participates in all practices. A narrative of anti-hierarchical liberation might provide a link between different practices, and provide routes for new social practices (and new agents to develop). The contestation of hierarchy, however, does not represent a new universal value. There are contexts in which goods are immanently developed but a challenge to structures that maintain inequalities of power is not generated – for instance, children playing in a sandbox. Thus, the rejection of hierarchy is not a universal guide to action, although, given the persistence of economic structures and institutions that enforce and legitimise these inequalities of power, it is highly likely that the contestation of hierarchy will remain a core anarchist value.

chist ideas exemplified by the chosen writers are the seeds beneath the snow from which a new future could grow. A book such as this, which provokes disagreements, which prompts further research, analysis, and debate, which increases the visibility and viability of anarchism, helps to nurture that possibility.

*Judy Greenway*

## **Subcommander Marcos: The Man and the Mask**

Nick Henck

Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2007

ISBN 976-0-8223-3995-3, £14.99p, 499 pages, 18 illustrations and three maps.

As Nick Henck acknowledges, writing a biography of the ‘Sub’ is a tricky business. Marcos has played games with journalists since his dramatic entry onto the public stage in December 1993, and has usually been able to run rings round them: dazzling them with his eloquence, impressing them with his experience and evident charisma and – sometimes – just simply lying to them. For at least a year he was a genuinely mysterious figure, but in February 1995 he was unmasked by the Mexican President as Rafael Sebastian Guillen Vicente, born in 1957, a one-time lecturer at Mexico’s Metropolitan Autonomous University. This unmasking was part of a political strategy to dismiss and isolate Marcos and the EZLN as an illegitimate coalition of indigenous groups engaging in special pleading and old-fashioned, sectarian Marxist revolutionaries.

The ‘Sub’ who emerges in Henck’s book is a quite different person. Henck avoids adulation: he notes Marcos’s relatively privileged urban background, his mistakes and – above all – how a variety of social and political factors contributed to the creation and success of the EZLN. Henck presents the aims of

The writers Goodway chooses to focus on were, he says, selected for their merit, importance and interest. On these criteria, Powys gets two chapters on the basis of his original contribution to anarchist thought and his under-appreciation as a literary figure. Colin Ward and Christopher Pallis get welcome acknowledgment for their role in disseminating as well as generating anarchist and libertarian ideas. There is no-one here who does not deserve recognition, but I was struck that no woman gets more than a couple of paragraphs in this book. Of course, any list can be criticised for its inclusions and exclusions, but does this omission imply that there have been no important women anarchist or left libertarian writers in Britain? The absence or lesser role of women within particular anarchist and left libertarian circles (and histories) itself calls for serious historical and political analysis. A different version of anarchist literary and intellectual tradition might emerge from a recognition of British women writers who influenced and were influenced by anarchist and libertarian ideas: Mary Wollstonecraft, whose feminism inspired so many women anarchists; poet and pamphleteer Louisa Bevington; Dora Marsden, suffragette, philosopher, and editor of *The Freewoman*; novelist and commentator Rebecca West; popular novelist and propagandist Ethel Mannin; historian Sheila Rowbotham, among many others. An approach which included both women and men, and asked questions about the gendering of anarchism, could begin to transform our ideas about what anarchist history is, what anarchist stories – and possibilities – there might be.

But all histories are incomplete histories, contributions to an ongoing debate, and Goodway's book should help to shift perceptions of anarchism amongst academics and activists. It is above all a welcome scholarly and political resource, which draws on extensive research and a passionate commitment to argue that in 'the harsh winter of the present' we face the stark choice – anarchism or annihilation (p.337). For him, the anar-

## 7. Conclusion

Whilst many of the main constellations of anarchism, such as individualist and social anarchisms, differ in fundamental aspects, they do share a commitment to prioritising ethical discourse. The differences, however, are best illustrated through unpicking the distinctive forms of normative, applied and meta-ethics. Both strict consequentialist and deontological anarchisms share similar weaknesses in that their commitment to moral universalism restricts agent freedom, recreates hierarchies and cannot provide an adequate account for the generation and identification of these universals. However, the alternative adopted by some egoist individualists and postanarchists, i.e. radical subjectivism, is inadequate on similar grounds. If subjectivism is right, then it restricts the possibility of meaningful ethical dialogue, recreates hierarchies between the liberated ego and the rest, and cannot adequately account for the creative ego, without recourse to the social forms it rejects.

In place of a subjectivist ethic, this paper has sketched out an alternative, based on a social account of virtues (but without the underlying essentialism usually associated with neo-Aristotelianism). This alternative suggests that values are observable and assessable, and open to discussion, but are non-universal. They are immanent to the practice or practices in which they are formed (and which they constitute). These standards are not unique to discrete practices, but can be found in adjacent social contexts. In anarchism these virtues are usually addressed in a shared ethical discourse, which prioritises the contestation of hierarchies, but also promotes the production of other goods.

*My thanks to Lesley Stevenson and Stuart Hanscomb for their valuable advice, in particular their help in turning my particular version of English into one that is nearly comprehensible to others.*

Exclusive!!!', Ian Bone <<http://ianbone.wordpress.com/2008/05/18/fake-labour-toffis-a-toff-exclusive/>> last accessed, 3 June 2008 'More *Guardian* Nepotism -Monbiot Horror!', February 28, 2008 <<http://ianbone.wordpress.com/2008/02/23/more-guardian-nepotism-monbiot-horror/>> last accessed 3, June 2008, and his book *Bash The Rich* (Bristol: Tangent. 2006).

opment of his own ideas, placing himself within the social and political cultures he discusses.

From these diverse sources emerges a complex vision of anarchism with an emphasis on the here and now, on the transformation of the everyday; which asserts the importance of sexuality and emotions as well as economics, of self-liberation as well as self-management, of transcendence as well as activism. Concerned that some chroniclers of British anarchism romanticise violence, Goodway argues that the identification of anarchism with terrorism and bomb-throwing devastated the emergent movement in the late nineteenth century, and warns against reinforcing that stereotypical image. Pointing out the immense contribution of anarchists to the anti-war movements of the twentieth century, he contends that 'the most original, creative anarchist thinking over the last seventy years has been within anarcho-pacifism. In an increasingly violent world [...] non-violent tactics have the most to commend them, to offer to present and future movements seeking radical reconstruction, and to allow the anarchist seeds beneath the snow to germinate' (p.14).<sup>2</sup> (Goodway's primary focus on individuals means that he gives only passing mention to the journal *Peace News*, since the 1930s a significant forum for the discussion of anarcho-pacifist ideas.)

This is an ambitious project, and in places the analysis gets lost in the detail. I found myself wishing alternately that the book was longer (so as to develop its arguments more fully) or shorter (so as to sharpen them up). Better copy-editing by the publishers would have addressed some unclear writing and repetition. However, every reader should be able to dig in and find something of value among the rich variety of material on offer.

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<sup>2</sup> The metaphor comes from Colin Ward's *Anarchy in Action* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1973).

anarchists and anarchism from the enormous condescension of scholars and political activists.

Britain may not have had an anarchist movement as such, but, Goodway argues, it has had 'a distinguished, minority intellectual, overwhelmingly literary anarchist — and [...] libertarian — tradition', part of 'a submerged but creative and increasingly relevant current of social and political theory and practice' (pp.10, 11). Acknowledging this tradition and its influences is, he believes, crucial if present-day radical activists are to learn from the past and not unnecessarily to re-invent, re-theorize, what is already there.

The book focuses on eleven writers representing a spectrum from left libertarianism to fully fledged anarchism in all its diverse manifestations. The central figures, Edward Carpenter, Oscar Wilde, John Cowper Powys, Herbert Read, Aldous Huxley, Alex Comfort, Christopher Pallis and Colin Ward, are each assessed on the basis of their contribution to anarchist thought. The remaining three, William Morris, George Orwell and E.P. Thompson, are discussed in the context of movements and events which have been particularly significant for anarchists in Britain: the late nineteenth/early twentieth century upsurge in anarchism, libertarian socialism and the labour movement; the Spanish Civil War; and the emergence, towards the end of the 1950s, of the new left and the campaign for nuclear disarmament. A host of other familiar and unfamiliar characters make brief, tantalising appearances.

Rather than seeking to produce a pure line of anarchist thought, the book traces influences, continuities and discontinuities, networks of association: a culture of anarchist ideas refracted through novels, essays, journalism, and political pamphlets, in fields ranging from sexology to town planning. The book is also indirectly a political autobiography: Goodway makes it clear how his subjects have contributed to the devel-

## **A is for Anarchy, V is for Vendetta: Images of Guy Fawkes and the Creation of Postmodern Anarchism**

LEWIS CALL

### **Abstract**

Although the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 failed at the level of conventional political action, it had a profound impact on Anglo-American political culture. The Plot added the face of Guy Fawkes to our political iconography, and introduced the word 'guy' into the English language. This paper argues that the face of Fawkes and the word 'guy' have become what post-structuralists call 'free floating signifiers.' Liberated from all permanent meaning, this image and this word have become potent instruments for the promotion of postmodern anarchism. The comic book *V for Vendetta* (Alan Moore and David Lloyd, 1981) makes very effective use of these instruments. This book uses the image of Guy Fawkes to initiate a powerful anarchist critique of fascism. The book experiments with postmodern symbolism, but its version of anarchism remains mainly modern. However, the film version of *V for Vendetta* (dir. James McTeigue, screenplay by the Wachowski Brothers, 2006) articulates a full-blown postmodern anarchism. This film has been widely criticised, but critics overlook the film's valuable contri-

butions. In the film, the face of Fawkes provides the basis for sophisticated representations of sexuality, mass media systems and anarchist political action. Through its visual iconography, the film thus provides mainstream cinema audiences with an effective introduction to the symbolic vocabulary of postmodern anarchism.

*Remember, remember  
The Fifth of November  
The Gunpowder Treason and Plot I know of no reason*

*Why Gunpowder Treason Should ever be forgot*  
-Traditional, circa 17<sup>th</sup> century

About four centuries ago, a group of radical Catholic dissidents attempted to assassinate James Stuart, the Scottish king who had recently taken the English crown following the death of Elizabeth I. The conspirators planned to detonate a large quantity of gunpowder beneath the Palace of Westminster during the opening session of Parliament in 1605. Had it succeeded, the Gunpowder Plot would have killed not only King James VI of Scotland, I of England, but also the assembled Lords and Commons. This would have effectively decapitated the nascent British state which the pro-Union James was so ardently pursuing. Of course, the Plot was discovered and foiled, the King and his Parliament were saved, and the kingdoms of England and Scotland were eventually united.

Yet this pleasant textbook historiography does not begin to address the real significance of the Plot. In practical terms, as Mark Nicholls has argued, the Plot may indeed have demonstrated the 'considerable efficiency at the administrative heart of Stuart England' (3). And yet at the level of symbolic representation, the Plot revealed the terrible fragility of the early modern British state. The emerging British state immediately committed itself to the project of *remembering* the Plot. For

book deserves to be read by all those with an interest in contemporary anarchism, whether of the class struggle variety or otherwise.

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## **Anarchist Seeds Beneath the Snow: Left-Libertarian Thought and British Writers from William Morris to Colin Ward**

David Goodway

Liverpool University Press, 2006, 401 + xi pp.

Paperback £20, ISBN:1-84631-026-1; hardback £50, ISBN 1-84631-025-3.

Coming out as an anarchist has some similarities to coming out as gay. A life-threatening admission in some times and places; in Britain today, likely to be met with scorn, disbelief or a patronising, amused tolerance. Goodway writes feelingly of the impact of such attitudes on his own life and work as a historian. Publishers are wary of the subject, and researching anarchism is not the best way to get on in academia.<sup>1</sup> More importantly, the political invisibility of British anarchism means, according to Goodway, that contemporary movements for change are missing out on crucial insights that anarchist example and analysis could provide. To adapt a phrase from one of his subjects, E.P. Thompson, this book attempts to rescue

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<sup>1</sup> It remains to be seen whether initiatives such as the Anarchist Academics weblit and Anarchist Studies Network will improve matters: (<http://lists.mutualaid.org/mailman/listinfo/anarchist.academics>; <http://www.anarchist-studies-network.org.uk>).



Society Publishers, 1987), which in its first edition exercised a profound influence on the anarchist and feminist-inspired non-violent direct action movement of the 1970s and 1980s. Moreover, at a more philosophical level *Rebel Alliances* does not adequately address the argument made by those who subscribe to non-violent methods that violent means compromise the goal of a non-violent anarchist society. Franks replies that creating non-hierarchical associations may involve violently breaking authoritarian relations, but isn't this an example of precisely the sort of ends-based, instrumentalist logic that he elsewhere consistently rejects? And at what point will the violence stop if revolution is no longer conceived in Leninist fashion as a millennial, time-bounded event?

Fourth, Franks adopts uncritically the elder Murray Bookchin's distinction between social anarchism and lifestyle anarchism, and then correlates it approvingly with his own distinction between class struggle anarchism and liberal anarchism. This theoretical move is problematic on a number of grounds, most fundamentally because it potentially promotes the sort of sectarian squabbling that has long marred and sapped the strength of the Marxist revolutionary tradition. To his credit, Franks takes great pains throughout *Rebel Alliances* to steer clear of unreflective sectarian positions. But when he refers to leading historians of the anarchist tradition such as James Joll, George Woodcock and Peter Marshall as 'critics of anarchism', and conflates individualism *tout court* with the rational egoistic forms it frequently assumes under capitalism, one feels that he has strayed onto the terrain of ideological dogmatism.

These, however, are marginal criticisms of a book that is by any reasonable measure a major scholarly accomplishment. At a time of widespread, unreflective criticism of the very idea of class struggle, Franks has backfooted the critics with a fresh and largely compelling account of British class struggle anarchism characterised by enormous intellectual integrity. This

four centuries, Britons have commemorated the plot every November 5<sup>th</sup>. But as the centuries have passed, *what* Britain remembers and *how* it remembers have changed dramatically (Sharpe 83–84). This represents a potentially serious problem for the modern British state. That state is essentially a mechanism for the representation and transmission of political power. As such, its very existence may depend upon its ability to control the representation of such foundational events as the Gunpowder Plot. And yet the modern state has clearly lost that ability. Beneath the reassuring official history of the Plot (treason foiled, state saved), there lurks a secret anarchist history.

This anarchist history is particularly interested in the changing significance of Guy Fawkes. Fawkes was not the leader of the Plot; that was Robert Catesby. But Fawkes has gained notoriety as the 'trigger man' who was meant to detonate the gunpowder. More significantly, the *image* of Fawkes has become a major icon in modern British political culture. The British state initially hoped to maintain a monopoly on representations of Fawkes, and for many years he was dutifully burned in effigy every November 5<sup>th</sup>. In the nineteenth century, however, the Fawkes image came to signify other things, such as resistance to the emerging disciplinary regime of modern municipal government. Meanwhile the name of Guy Fawkes was undergoing a remarkable mutation. Fawkes himself jettisoned the name Guy in 1603, and went by 'Guido' thereafter (Fraser 90). His decision to detach the signifier 'guy' from the signified (himself) would have momentous consequences, for it would leave his name available for later political use. Indeed, when we consider the subsequent anarchist purposes for which his name and image have been employed, it's tempting to conclude that this symbolic gesture may have been the most *radical* thing that Fawkes ever did. Soon after the Plot was uncovered, the word 'guy' entered the English language, first with a pejorative connotation (a

‘bad guy’), and then, as it drifted across the Atlantic, without (Clancy 285). Today in casual American speech we are all ‘guys.’ (‘Hey, guys!’ says our four year old daughter when she desires attention from her parents.)

Depending upon the context, ‘guy’ can signify men, women and even inanimate objects (Clancy 288). The word ‘guy’ has become a wonderful example of what post-structuralists call a free floating signifier. It signifies — for language cannot help but signify — but it never signifies the same way twice. It is therefore the most dangerous of signifiers — or, from an anarchist point of view, the most interesting.

The visual image of Guy Fawkes’s face has gone through a similar mutation. The face of Fawkes thus demonstrates (contrary to the classical structuralist theory outlined by Ferdinand de Saussure) that the symbol can be just as arbitrary as the sign. The face of Fawkes has become a potent free floating symbol. It is thus a potentially powerful instrument for the articulation of postmodern anarchism. Skilfully wielded, it can cut right through the representational structure of the modern state. In the late twentieth century, writers and artists began to recognise the radical potential of the Guy Fawkes image. In 1981, Alan Moore and David Lloyd published their groundbreaking *V for Vendetta*, a politically serious comic book (or, as they were coming to be known then, ‘graphic novel’). The hero of this book is an anarchist known only as V, who wages war both symbolic and real against a fictional fascist state. V, who is horribly disfigured, wears a Guy Fawkes mask at all times. In *V for Vendetta*, the image of Fawkes signifies freedom of a distinctively left-libertarian sort. In 2006, James McTeigue directed a film version of *V*; Hollywood’s sometimes brilliant Wachowski brothers provided the screenplay. McTeigue and the Wachowskis had already experimented heavily with postmodern anarchism in *The Matrix*; *V* continued and expanded that experiment. The film was widely criticised (not least by Alan Moore) as a

highly impressive, as is the thoughtful manner in which Franks consistently links anarchist practice and theory.

There are aspects of the work that might have been further refined or developed. First, I found the two-part structure of the bibliography somewhat confusing. Part one, entitled ‘Primary Sources’, is restricted to works written from an avowedly anarchist or anti-state communist perspective, while part two, entitled ‘Secondary Texts’, is devoted to ‘commentaries (which may still be compatible with anarchism but were not authorially positioned or generally viewed as promoting anarchism) or texts explicitly espousing a competing viewpoint.’ In order to find a referenced work, I therefore had to think which category it was likely to fall into. In many cases, I found myself questioning the author’s judgements. Why, for example, is Stirner placed in the first category, while April Carter, Peter Marshall, George Woodcock, and Franks himself are assigned to the second? And what purposes might the categories serve other than potentially sectarian ones?

Second, the book makes a plausible case for the compatibility of certain features of ‘postanarchism’ and contemporary class struggle anarchism, but it does so without exploring possible tensions between the two. In addition, this aspect of the book’s analysis is based primarily on a reading of Todd May’s work. It would be interesting to know whether a broader treatment of postanarchism would yield different conclusions.

Third, the text fails to do justice to the non-violent anarchist position, and in fact consistently refers to it in a somewhat mocking and dismissive tone as an entirely middle-class, intellectual, individualistic, passive, liberal, and Christian phenomenon. Quite apart from the contradictions between some of these adjectives, Franks’s account overlooks the distinguished libertarian and anarchist traditions of radically democratic and revolutionary non-violent resistance. In this regard I recommend George Lakey’s excellent *Powerful Peacemaking: A Strategy for a Living Revolution* (New

Following an opening survey of the histories of British anarchism, the book launches into a challenging and original discussion of anarchist ethics. Of particular interest is the attempt to develop an 'ideal type' of anarchism that is then used throughout the book to assess various forms of contemporary libertarian practice. What chiefly distinguishes Franks's method of ethical evaluation is the recognition that means and ends are irreducible parts of the same process. By comparison to this practical, prefigurative approach, alternative ethical frameworks are found wanting: among them instrumentalist, end-based accounts such as utilitarianism, blueprint forms of utopianism, and Franks's *bete noire* in the book, Leninism. Franks also effectively targets liberal, means-centred ethics, but the critique of Leninism here and elsewhere in the work is particularly well handled. Indeed, one of the great pleasures of the book is the understated relish with which Franks carries out this particular piece of philosophical demolition work.

The contrast between Franks's prefigurative conception of anarchism and the strategic politics characteristic of Leninism is particularly apparent in chapter three of the book, which deals with the vexed question of revo-

lutionary agency. Whereas Leninist accounts tend to begin by identifying one ultimate source of oppression, and then proceed to develop the idea of a vanguard or universal agent whose liberation ends all oppression, Franks formulates a much more fluid and multifaceted conception of agency which he suggests shares certain features in common with contemporary poststructuralist theories.

Finally, in chapters four and five of the book, Franks uses the ethical framework developed in chapters two and three in order to analyse an exceptionally wide range of anarchist organisational forms and tactics. In both of these closing chapters the sheer volume of research material effectively synthesised is

betrayal of the original book. Yet how could the film betray a book which was itself simply the latest re-appropriation of a slippery symbol now four centuries old? In fact, the film was much more interesting than its critics realised. In the hands of McTeigue and the Wachowskis, the face of Fawkes realised its full potential. It became a truly nomadic, perpetually mutating postmodern symbol, impossible for the state to nail down. Shifting meanings in every frame, the face demonstrated its ability to destabilise the entire representational order which underwrites state power in the postmodern world.

Thanks to Moore and Lloyd, the face of Fawkes took over newsstands in Britain and the US during the '80s; thanks to the Wachowskis and McTeigue, it took over billboards, cinema screens and televisions in the early twenty-first century. At this point, we must consider the possibility that the face of Fawkes may have ripped a hole in the dominant symbolic order. This event is comparable in form, if not in scope, to the events of May 1968.<sup>1</sup> Inexpensive Fawkes masks are now widely available. They make a striking (if ambiguous) visual statement, while providing their wearers with an anonymity which is increasingly valuable in our surveillance-saturated culture. The face of Fawkes is everywhere now, at peace rallies and anti-nuclear demonstrations. I have seen that face mingled with those of homeless people and recycling environmentalists in downtown Vancouver, British Columbia. And in my modest college town of San Luis Obispo, California, I have seen a group of Guys (probably students) gesturing dramatically at the downtown shopping mall. What does this signify? Perhaps a postmodern critique of consumerism?<sup>2</sup> Yes,

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Baudrillard, for example, read the events of May as a symbolic insurrection with long-term consequences; in his 1976 book *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, he argued that 'the catastrophic situation opened up by May '68 is not over' (34).

<sup>2</sup> This is complicated by the fact that the mask itself has become a consumer commodity, available for USD 6.49 on amazon.com. But if we use con-

for that is how I choose to read it at this moment. Liberated from all permanent meaning, the face of Fawkes stands ready to engage capital and the state in the place where they are weakest, the terrain of representation. Only a nomadic symbol of this kind could possibly keep up with the rampant mutations of post-industrial capitalism. The face of Fawkes is thus a vital instrument for the project of postmodern anarchism.

## 1605: Premodern Anglo-catholic Anarchism and the Origins of Postmodern Anarchism

Antonia Fraser has rightly described the historiography of the Gunpowder Plot in terms of ‘the continuing battle between Pro-Plotters and NoPlotters’ (349). Modern historiography is clearly dominated by the former, who hold that in November 1605, a small group of Catholic radicals led by Robert Catesby attempted to blow up the Houses of Parliament. However, an intriguingly stubborn Catholic counter-history holds that the plot was actually a fiction created by James’s chief minister, Robert Cecil, Earl of Salisbury, in order to condemn the Catholics (Levine 192). This counterhistory was articulated most famously by John Gerard SJ in 1897. Although the Jesuit interpretation has been refuted many times, James Sharpe is quite right to point out that this ‘recurrent counter-history of the Plot ... has never quite gone away’ (46). By continuing to wage a stubborn guerrilla campaign against the mainstream historiography,<sup>3</sup> the Catholic counterstory draws our attention to the flexible, malleable symbolic nature of the Plot. The

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sumer markets to acquire the tools we require to critique capitalism, we are only making practical use of the existing instruments in order to transcend the existing order of things – a very anarchist proposition.

<sup>3</sup> Francis Edwards SJ presented the Catholic counter-narrative once again in his 1969 book *Guy Fawkes: The Real Story of the Gunpowder Plot?* Fa-

## Reviews

### Rebel Alliances: The Means and Ends of Contemporary British Anarchisms

Benjamin Franks

AK Press and Dark Star, Edinburgh, 2006, 475 pp.

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The stated aim of *Rebel Alliances* is to ‘provide a convincing, documented account of contemporary anarchism and to critically evaluate its tactical and organisational forms through an appropriate framework.’ If one qualifies this statement by replacing ‘contemporary anarchism’ with ‘contemporary class-struggle anarchism in Britain’, then *Rebel Alliances* lives up to its promise most admirably. More than this, it is an extraordinarily well-researched and thoughtful example of activist research that adheres to exacting scholarly standards.

The book begins by delimiting the subject matter of study. Apart from naming the organisations that he groups under the heading of ‘class struggle anarchism’, Franks sets out four ‘hesitantly proposed’ and contextspecific criteria meant to distinguish class struggle anarchism from both liberal anarchism and Leninism. These include a complete rejection of capitalism and the market economy; an egalitarian concern for the interests and freedoms of others as part of a process of creating non-hierarchical social relations; a complete rejection of state power and other quasi-state mediating forces; and a recognition that means have to prefigure ends.

vement « anti-globalisation » a la constitution europeenne au nom de l'internationalisme laisse reveur. Le probleme n'est pas d'opposer le global au local. Les deux sont articules. Les formes globales de la domination n'existent qu'a travers une multiplicity de formes locales. Car le «local», ce n'est pas la partie qu'il faudrait opposer au tout, c'est tel ou tel point singulier dans l'organisation des dominations globales. En ce sens, une lutte politique est toujours locale: je veux dire par la qu'elle s'en prend toujours a un point particulier, un relais ou un nœud singulier dans le systeme de la domination et son travail est de degager la forme universelle de ce qui advient en ce point. Ce point particulier, ce peut etre telle reunion d'un de ces organismes internationaux qui pretendent regenter le monde; mais ce peut etre aussi le conflit suscite par une delocalisation, le demantelement d'une forme de protection sociale, une legislation qui restreint la liberte de circulation des populations alors qu'on ouvre grandes les portes aux capitaux, etc. Ce qui est a l'ordre du jour, c'est assurement la creation d'une nouvelle Internationale. Mais une Internationale, ce n'est pas une organisation specialisee dans le global; c'est une emanation des collectifs en lutte sur des points singuliers, qui travaille a les coordonner, a les rendre solidaires, a universaliser leurs motifs et leurs actions.]

Plot resists fixed interpretations. Its historical details are well established, and yet despite four centuries of historiography, the ultimate meaning of those details remains undetermined (and perhaps indeterminate). The Plot remains a contested symbolic terrain. Although it occurred towards the beginning of the modern period in English political history, the Plot thus contains surprisingly strong postmodern elements. Indeed, the Plot and its numerous representations provide us with a unique opportunity to study the long term articulation of a postmodern symbolic system.

The Plot signifies in some interesting ways. One vital, though frequently overlooked, aspect of the Plot is its anti-Union significance. Guy Fawkes wrote of a 'natural hostility between the English and the Scots,' and claimed that 'it will not be possible to reconcile these two nations, as they are, for very long' (Fraser 89). King James was determined to pursue his political dream of Anglo-Scottish Union; it was he who proposed that the entire island should be known as Britain (Fraser 103-4). Here we see the first real stirrings of the modern British state. That state would indeed come to know itself as the United Kingdom of Great Britain. Its name and its power would both be based upon its successful manipulation of language and meaning. But before this would be possible, the potentially United Kingdom would have to confront the demands of a revolutionary movement which intended, as Fawkes said, to blow the new rulers back into Scotland (Fraser 209). Although this revolution had been foiled at the level of conventional politics, its linguistic and symbolic impact would be felt for centuries to come. Nowadays we are all Guys, and this is surely politically important.

The figure of Guy Fawkes has power not only at the linguistic level, but also at the level of the symbolic. This becomes es-

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ther Edwards has continued to develop that narrative in subsequent decades (Levine, 195, note 10).

pecially clear if we consider the intriguing customs which have emerged around the 5<sup>th</sup> of November. A year after the Plot was discovered, Parliament declared November 5<sup>th</sup> an annual holiday (3 James I Cap. 1); as this celebration was written into the Anglican prayerbook, it was theoretically compulsory for all subjects until 1859 (Sharpe 79). The 5<sup>th</sup> was the only national feast to survive in Cromwell's Commonwealth (Fraser 353). On 5 November 1588, the Protestant William of Orange landed in Devon, and delivered Britain from the Catholic regime of James II.

It would seem at this point that the 5<sup>th</sup> was safe symbolic territory for the forces of Protestant nationalism. Yet in the nineteenth century, the figure of Guy Fawkes was rehabilitated, made into the subject of comic pantomime (Sharpe 118). Commemoration of the Powder Treason morphed into the more secular, less threatening Bonfire Night. Strangely, it was at this precise historical moment that the anarchistic element of the holiday became manifest. In the mid nineteenth century, English towns began to see the danger of social unrest inherent in Bonfire Night. At Guildford in Surrey, members of the 'Guy's Society' began to defy local police and officials, leaving the town 'at the mercy of the "Guys"' (Sharpe 153). The situation was even more striking in 1853; according to a local paper, 'a stranger would have imagined himself in a country disturbed by anarchy and red republicans' (Sharpe 155). As Sharpe has shown, local elites began to withdraw their support for the holiday as they came to associate it with lower class unrest and problems of law and order (Sharpe 163). With the elites abandoning what little control they may once have had over this anarchic holiday, it soon mutated into a generalised secular assault on authority. This assault has frequently taken a left-wing form: in recent years, Bonfire Night has featured burning effigies of Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush (Sharpe 175).

I think that there is a danger in using the pretext of globalisation in order to say that nations and forms of organisation attached to it must now cede their place to a global anti-capitalist movement. Nations have not disappeared and institutions called supranational are firstly the instruments which nation States use to 'delocalise' politics. From this point of view the support given by part of the 'anti-globalisation' movement to the European constitution in the name of internationalism really makes you wonder. The problem is not to oppose the global to the local. The two are linked together. Global forms of domination only exist via a multiplicity of local forms. For the 'local' isn't the part that must be opposed to the whole; it is such and such a singular point in the organisation of global dominations. In this sense, a political struggle is always local: I mean that it always erupts at a particular relay or singular nodal point in the system of domination and its job is to bring out the universal form of what occurs at this point. This particular point can be a specific meeting of one of these international bodies which claims to rule over the world; but it can also be the conflict incited by delocalisation, the dismantling of a form of social protection, or legislation which restricts the freedom of movement of populations just when the doors are opened wide to capitalism, etc. The creation of a new International is assuredly the order of day. But an International is not an organisation specialising in the global; it is an emanation of collectives struggling over singular points which work to coordinate them, to unite them and to universalise their motives and actions.

[Je crois qu'il y a danger a arguer de la globalisation pour dire que les nations et les formes d'organisation qui y sont attachees doivent maintenant ceder la place a un mouvement anti-capitaliste global. Les nations n'ont pas disparu et les institutions dites supranationales sont d'abord des instruments dont les Etats nationaux se servent pour « delocaliser » la politique. De ce point de vue le soutien donne par un part du mou-

new forms of action. The weakness of Marxist and anarchist visions has often been to think in terms of reality and appearance instead of thinking in terms of the fluid distribution of possibilities and capacities. It is not a question of being incorporated into state structures but of believing that these constitute an effective field of battle where each camp's forces increase or diminish.

[Comme je le disais plus haut, je refuse la vision qui oppose l'Etat a la societe comme l'artifice a la nature. Il en va des formes de la societe comme des formes de l'Etat: les unes et les autres sont traversees par l'opposition entre logique egalitaire et logiques inegalitaire; L'Etat dit democratique que nous connaissons est un hybride: il repose en droit sur la reconnaissance de la capacite de tous et certaines de ses formes sont le resultat des conquetes des luttes democratiques. En meme temps l'Etat est une machine oligarchique qui fait fonctionner ces formes dans sa logique propre et tend a privatiser l'espace public. D'un cote donc, il faut affirmer une politique independante de la logique etatique. De l'autre l'Etat est un terrain de lutte: je ne parle pas de la lutte pour « prendre le pouvoir », je parle de la lutte pour affirmer un pouvoir accru du peuple sur tous les terrains. Cette lutte-la produit des effets de redefinition des droits et transformations des institutions, que je me refuse personnellement a considerer comme des illusions parce qu'ils definissent des capacites d'action nouvelles. La faiblesse des visions marxiste et anarchiste a souvent ete de penser en termes de realite et d'apparence au lieu de penser en termes de distribution mouvante des possibles et des capacites. Il ne s'agit pas de s'incorporer dans les structures etatiques, il s'agit de considerer qu'elles sont un champ de bataille effectif ou les forces de chaque camp s'accroissent ou diminuent.]

*What sort of future do you see for radical politics today? Does the global anti-capitalist movement suggest a way forward in your view; or are different modes of political action and organization necessary? (SN)*

This interesting assault on the symbols of modern conservative statism reminds us of the hidden history of the 5<sup>th</sup> of November. In 1605, premodern anarchists attempted to annihilate the nascent British state in order to return England to Catholicism (and presumably leave Scotland to its own devices). The emerging British state quickly rooted out the conspirators, but it could not be done with the conspiracy so quickly. Indeed, the modern British state has defined itself, in important ways, by the oppositional stance which it maintains towards the kind of premodern anarchism embodied by Guy Fawkes. In 1605, Fawkes and his fellows attempted to assassinate not just a king, but the entire apparatus of the early modern British state. The Plot was not merely Catholic but also strongly opposed to the emergence of a strong, centralised United Kingdom of Great Britain. The rehabilitation of Fawkes corresponds to a growing sense of frustration at the perpetual expansion of British state power. Guy Fawkes and Bonfire Night now signify not Catholic terrorism but devolution, local autonomy, working class rejection of Thatcherite social and economic conservatism, and a radical critique of Anglo-American militarism. These are, of course, precisely the values of contemporary British anarchism. Guy Fawkes has thus become an unlikely heroic symbol for the forces of anti-statism today.

### **1981: Modern and Postmodern Anarchisms in Moore and Lloyd's *vfor Vendetta***

'He's become some kind of all-purpose symbol to them, hasn't he?' (Moore and Lloyd, 252). The speaker is Mr Finch, head of the investigative police force in Alan Moore's fictional fascist Britain. Finch is speaking about 'V', the mysterious protagonist of the 1981 comic book *V for Vendetta*. Through

the entire book, V's face remains hidden behind a Guy Fawkes mask. Thus he is indeed an 'all-purpose symbol,' for that's the one thing about the Fawkes image which actually *doesn't* change. Mr Finch is the heir of hapless Victorian police in places like Guildford. Finch is too slow by half: it is only at the end of the narrative that he finally recognises the real threat which V poses. V is dangerous because he is not a person but an idea. More precisely, V is a subversive system of signification. To state the problem in structuralist terms, V is a free floating signifier, the kind which refuses to become permanently attached to any signified. This is especially interesting, since in the classic structuralist model, the linguistic sign, was meant to be arbitrary, but the visual symbol was not. Saussure insisted that with a symbol, 'there is the rudiment of a natural bond between the signifier and signified' (68). *V for Vendetta* thus contains a powerful potential poststructuralism; its radical argument is that a symbol can be just as slippery as a sign. V's choice of symbols was especially clever, for by 1981 the face of Fawkes had almost four centuries of shifting significations behind it. Writer Alan Moore and artist David Lloyd recognised that a symbol can actually become so freighted with multiple meanings that in the end it collapses under its own weight, and escapes meaning altogether. Counter-intuitively, the rudiment of meaning which Saussure found in the symbol can accumulate to a critical point beyond which further meaning is impossible. This point constitutes an event horizon which surrounds the black hole of signification.

Not surprisingly, *V* approaches these themes cautiously, often retreating into more conventional representations of modern anarchism. These representations are politically daring but stylistically safe, and they illustrate for us the boundaries of the possible in 1981. At that moment, comics were just coming into their own. For most of the twentieth century, comic books had been excluded from that privileged canon of works thought to be suitable subjects for literary criticism. The influ-

On ne part pas de l'inegalite pour aller vers l'egalite sous la direction de ceux qui sont en avance sur ce chemin. On part de l'egalite, on part de la presupposition de la capacite des pretendus attardes, on s'attache a developper les capacites deja presentes et non a « reduire » des inegalites ou des handicaps. Ce que l'idee de l'emancipation intellectuelle nous amene donc a recuser, ce n'est pas seulement l'autoritarisme des avant-gardes, c'est le schema qui le legitime. C'est la conception de l'histoire orientee vers un but d'egalite ou de liberte a atteindre selon une strategie des fins et des moyens. Il faut partir de la liberte et de l'egalite realisables *hic* et *nunc*. Ce sont ces dynamiques presentes de mise en acte de l'egalite et de la liberte qui creent des possibilites nouvelles et non les buts strategiques.]

*What is the place of the State in your understanding of politics? Should radical politics try to avoid or distance itself from the State, or is some incorporation within the representative structures of the State inevitable? (SN)*

As I have already said above, I refuse the vision which opposes the State to society as artifice to nature. The same goes for forms of society as it does for forms of the State: both are traversed by the opposition between a logic of equality and logics of inequality; the State called democratic that we know is a hybrid: it rests by right on the recognition of the capacity of the whole, and certain of its forms are the result of the conquests of democratic struggles. At the same time, the State is an oligarchical machine that makes these forms work according to its own logic and it tends to privatise public space. On the one hand, then, it is necessary to affirm a politics independently of State logic. On the other, the State is a terrain of struggle: I am not talking about the struggle to 'take power', but of the struggle to affirm the power accrued to the people on all terrains. The latter struggle produces effects of the redefinition of rights and the transformation of institutions that, personally, I refuse to regard as illusory because they point to capacities for



vanced, in order to reduce their backwardness. But precisely this way of conceiving things infinitely reproduces the backwardness it is supposed to reduce. Things must be approached from the opposite direction. Starting from inequality in order to move to equality under the direction of the most advanced is not the way. We begin from equality and by presupposing the capability of those allegedly backward, then commit ourselves to developing capacities already present, not to 'reducing' inequalities or handicaps. What the idea of intellectual emancipation leads us to challenge then is not only the authoritarianism of the avant-gardes but the schema legitimating it. It is a conception of history, oriented towards a goal of equality or liberty, achieved according to a strategy of means and ends. We must start from liberty and equality as realisable *hic et nunc*. It is these dynamics present in the enactment of equality and liberty which create new possibilities and not strategic goals.

[Certainement. L'inventeur de l'emancipation intellectuelle, Joseph Jacotot, avait oppose radicalement l'egalite intellectuelle qui etait toujours pour lui un rapport entre des individus aux formes politiques qui pour lui obeissaient a une logique inegalitaire des corps sociaux. Tous les hommes pouvaient etre egaux dans leurs relations, mais l'ordre social comme tel etait pour lui voue a l'inegalite. J'ai pense que l'on pouvait refuser cette vision pessimiste. Dans l'action politique il y a bien aussi une affirmation de la capacite des anonymes a construire d'autres savoirs, d'autres formes d'expertise et d'enquete que ceux des pouvoirs, de leur capacite a inventer d'autres formes de relations. Mais ce qui est effectivement essentiel dans le modele de Emancipation intellectuel qu'il propose, c'est une inversion de la logique pedagogique qui est aussi celle de l'avant-garde. Le modele pedagogique dominant veut que ceux qui sont plus avances guident les moins avances, afin de reduire le retard. Mais precisement cette maniere de concevoir les choses reproduit indefiniment le retard qu'elle se propose de reduire. Il faut prendre les choses a l'envers.

ential American author and critic Samuel Delany has classified comics, along with science fiction and pornography, as 'paraliteratures.'<sup>4</sup> Delany has argued persuasively that the paraliteratures can contribute to our culture in unique and innovative ways, particularly at the level of form. During the 80s, comic writers and artists explored substantial literary themes, often in the framework of extended, multi-issue story arcs which could be collected later on and re-issued as 'graphic novels.' Frank Miller's acclaimed series *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) re-imagined Batman as a vicious thug, and raised ethical questions about his vigilantism. 1986 also saw the publication of Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's *Watchmen*, a tale of believably neurotic superheroes told with an innovative cinematic style.

Comics were not only becoming more serious in the '80s, they were also getting political. Interestingly, both Miller's *Dark Knight* and Moore's *Watchmen* emphasised their late Cold War settings: the threat of US-Soviet nuclear war figures prominently in both narratives. It is important to remember that dystopian pessimism about the near future remained a very prominent feature of Anglo-American popular culture even as Mikhail Gorbachev began to explore the possibility of a thaw in US-Soviet relations. *Watchmen* represented a continuation of the themes that Moore and Lloyd had explored in 1981, when they published *V for Vendetta* in the English magazine *Warrior*. In *V*, Moore employed a plot device that was already becoming recognisable as one of the major political tropes of late Cold War comics: a limited nuclear war between the US and the Soviet Union had ushered in a nuclear winter,

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<sup>4</sup> Indeed, for Delany, comic books are at the forefront of the cultural conflict between 'serious literature' and the paraliteratures. Delany argues that the question 'Can comics be art?' prevents 'the serious consideration as art (in the limited, value-bound sense) of *any* texts from any of the paraliterary genres, SF, comics, pornography, mysteries, westerns ...' ('Politics of Paraliterary Criticism,' 236).

and the resulting political chaos had enabled a fascist regime to take power in Britain. *V for Vendetta* appeared not long after the elections of President Ronald Reagan in the US and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in Britain. Political culture in both Britain and the States was increasingly conservative, even reactionary, and deeply hostile to any sympathetic representation of left-wing politics. Given the state of Anglo-American political culture at the time, it is fairly incredible that Moore and Lloyd could tell their sympathetic tale of a swashbuckling Fawkes-faced anarchist. But sometimes it pays to be paraliterary. As Greg Hoppenstand has argued, comics are the perfect medium for political stories, because they can get away with more: much like Aesop's fables, '*V for Vendetta* was able to blast away at emotionally charged issues also without drawing direct and hostile scrutiny from the government to its moralizing' (521).

*V for Vendetta* offers a clever, insightful look at the rise of fascism. The fascist 'Norsefire' party takes advantage of the power vacuum which occurs as the liberal British state collapses in the aftermath of the nuclear war. 'There wasn't any government any more. Just lots of little gangs, all trying to take over' (28). Of course, this is what the contemporary corporate media often mistake for anarchy: social and political chaos, resulting from the sudden absence of an effective repressive state. But *V* refuses this standard slander. As he prepares to blow up the Old Bailey, V names Anarchy his mistress, and claims that 'she has taught me that justice is meaningless without freedom' (41). There is a strong libertarian theme in *V*, and this is an important part of Moore's late Cold War political critique: Moore finds Soviet-style state communism just as repugnant as the conservative Anglo-American capitalism with which it conspires to destroy the world. V's young protege Evey soon recognises the source of V's power: 'you can do whatever you want, can't you? I suppose that's conquering the universe' (43).

maintenir le vieux schema marxiste selon lequel le capitalisme produirait ses propres fossoyeurs. Il propage du meme coup la fable selon laquelle le travail materiel, manuel aurait tout simplement disparu. Et il fait en meme temps disparaître le fait que l'exploitation capitaliste aujourd'hui passe par toute une multiplicity de formes dont un certain nombre ressemblent plus au travail domestique du 19° siecle qu'a la technologie futuriste. Aujourd'hui comme hier, il faut distinguer le travail comme repartition des forces productives au sein de l'economie globale et le travail en temps que forme [d]e subjectivation collective capable d'agir sur cette repartition. Les puissances du travail immateriel que le Capital developpe sont et demeurent ses propres forces. Celles-ci ne feront jamais exploser le systeme par elles-memes. Seules le peuvent les puissances nees dans la lutte contre sa domination.]

*In The Ignorant School Master, you develop a notion of the equality of knowledge in which the position of mastery and authority is unseated. Do you see this as a kind of model for politics; do you propose an anti-authoritarian form of politics, for instance, which is not led by the vanguard party? (SN)*

Certainly. The inventor of intellectual emancipation, Joseph Jacotot, had radically opposed the intellectual inequality which was, for him, always a relation between individuals and political forms of social groups obeying, for him, a non-egalitarian logic. Everyone could be equal in their personal relations, but the social order as such was for him doomed to inequality. I thought that this pessimistic vision could be opposed. In political action also there is indeed an affirmation of the capacity of anonymous members to construct other knowledges, other forms of expertise and inquiry than those of the powers that be, and of their capacity to invent other forms of social relations. But what is in fact essential in the model of intellectual emancipation proposed is an inversion of the pedagogical logic, which is also that of the avant-garde. The dominant pedagogical model requires that the most advanced guide the less ad-

make a subversive potential coincide with a certain place in a certain type of productive apparatus. This has meant, in terms of the past, challenging the identification of the activist proletarian with the worker of big industry. Similarly, today this means refusing the theses which try to identify a figure of the worker produced by the transformations of capitalism and endowed with the virtue of transgressing the system. The discourse on immaterial work and the new 'cognitary' (*cognitaire*) subject tries to keep to the old Marxist schema according to which capitalism would produce its own grave diggers. Concomitantly, it propagates the fable according to which material, manual work would simply disappear. And at the same time it excludes the fact that capitalist exploitation today occurs via a whole multiplicity of forms, a certain number of which bear a closer resemblance to nineteenth century domestic work than to futuristic technology. Today, as yesterday, we must distinguish work as the division of productive forces at the heart of the global economy and work in time that forms a collective subjectivation capable of acting against this division. The forces of immaterial work that Capital develops are and remain its distinctive strength. The latter will never, by itself, shatter the system. The forces born of the struggle against its domination alone can do it.

[J'ai effectivement toujours insiste sur la difference entre la subjectivation ouvriere ou proletaire et toutes les formes d'identification, economiques, sociales ou culturelles de l'ouvrier qui cherchaient a faire coincider un potentiel subversif avec une certaine place dans un certain type d'appareil productif. Cela voulait dire, pour le passe, recuser l'identification du proletaire militant avec l'ouvrier de la grande industrie. De la meme fa?on cela veut dire aujourd'hui refuser les theses qui cherchent a identifier une figure ouvriere produite par les transformations du capitalisme et dotee par la d'une vertu de transgression du systeme. Le discours sur le travail immateriel et le nouveau sujet « cognitaire » cherche a

To their credit, Moore and Lloyd also avoid the easy descent into hedonistic individualism which represents the major danger of this libertarianism. When V tells Evey that 'Do what thou wilt ... shall be the whole of the law,' she resists his second-hand hedonism: 'quoting Aleister Crowley isn't good enough' (217). The comic book continues to interrogate its own libertarian values. As the citizens of fascist Britain heed V's call to revolution, the fascist regime begins to crumble; rioting and disorder ensue. 'All this riot and uproar, V ... is *this* anarchy?' Evey demands. 'Is *this* the land of do-as-you-please?' (195). V informs her that 'anarchy means "without leaders"; not "without order." With anarchy comes an age of ordnung, of true order, which is to say voluntary order.' V is calm, almost didactic. His speech reads like a Kropotkin essay; this is the language of modern left-anarchism. V also repeats Bakunin's famous equation of the creative and destructive urges. V's position is the very essence of modern anarchist praxis: he admires the liberating potential of thoughtful destruction, but he also longs for the day when it might give way to a more peaceful creativity. 'Let us raise a toast to all our bombers, all our bastards,' declares V 'Let's drink their health ... then meet with them no more' (222). This point is important enough to warrant repetition: Evey remembers V's words as she makes her own difficult political choices after his death (248). V's final message to London is a rousing call to seize the creative potential inherent in the destruction of existing political forms: 'in anarchy, there is another way. With anarchy, from rubble comes new life, hope re-instated' (258).

Moore's bold anarchist vision was certainly a breath of fresh air for Thatcherite Britain, but his version of anarchism remained mostly modern. *V for Vendetta* retains the fondness for dialectical thinking which can be found in much of the 'scientific' anarchism of the nineteenth century. 'Your pretty empire took so long to build. Now, with a snap of history's fingers ... down it goes' (208). V is history's fingers snapping,

and he isn't the only one. A long-suffering female Party member, who has been sexually exploited by high ranking male fascists, plans to assassinate the fascist dictator. 'History's moving my legs and nothing, nothing can stop me,' she thinks (234). *V* reveals the limitations of the dialectical approach. After *V*'s death, Evey comes to understand that he mattered mainly as an idea. She thinks about removing his Guy Fawkes mask to see who he 'really was,' but hesitates: 'if I take off that mask, something will go away forever, be diminished because whoever you are isn't as big as the idea of you' (250). There is something troubling about *V*'s anonymity. It recalls Bakunin's critique of Marxist economic determinism: if history were truly determined by the forces of dialectical materialism, then the political choices and actions of individuals couldn't possibly matter. *V for Vendetta* suggests that after all is said and done, *V* is not a vibrant, authentic individual shaping history, but an empty, impersonal force: an idea changing history. This suggests a dialectic which is not even Marxist but Hegelian: *V* is the owl of Minerva, and the dialectic in which he operates is the purely abstract, idealist dialectic of Hegel's *Phenomenology*. It's hard to see much radical potential here.

Luckily, *V* does manage to transcend modern, dialectical thinking in some important ways. The book does flirt with a more innovative postmodern politics. This can be seen most clearly in its treatment of broadcast media. Fascist state television transmits typical racist rubbish, such as the adventures of the futuristic Aryan superhero 'Storm Saxon.' When *V* interrupts the broadcast, there are predictable protests from the populace: '... pay your bloody licence money for?' (112). (This is perhaps an ironic comment on the fact that British citizens must pay licence fees for the privilege of allowing BBC state television to tell them what they ought to think.) The fascist authorities are terrified by *V*'s ability to seize the means of information: 'We can't broadcast immediately ... but somebody else already is' (186). As the fascists lose control over the media

censees separer la fiction du document, par exemple lorsqu'un cineaste comme Pedro Costa transforme un travailleur immigré au chômage en une sorte de roi Lear (*Colossal Youth*) ou lorsque des cineastes libanais comme Kalil Joreige et Joana Hadjithomas traitent la guerre civile et l'oppression étrangère non pas à travers des histoires de violence et de mort mais à travers des histoires de film disparu ou de pellicules impossibles à développer (*Le Film disparu*). Ils attestent ainsi la capacité de jeu de groupes humains enfermés par la logique dominante dans la catégorie de victimes à plaindre. C'est aussi ce qui se passe quand un homme de théâtre comme John Malkovich mobilise comme acteurs les membres d'une communauté déshéritée de Los Angeles. Ce sont trois exemples parmi mille autres. La vertu politique de l'art opère quand il brouille les frontières qui le séparent du non-art (ce qui n'est pas la même chose que la volonté de «réaliser» l'art en le supprimant qui a marqué l'époque des grandes entreprises avant-gardistes). Il est clair que des effets similaires peuvent être produits dans d'autres domaines concernant la distribution des savoirs ou la production et la diffusion de l'information. C'est par exemple ce qui se passe aujourd'hui avec Internet: un éclatement des cadres au sein desquels l'information se trouvait canalisée. Et pour moi l'action politique elle-même est une activité «esthétique» dans la mesure où elle fait voir comme politiques des objets qui n'étaient pas reconnus comme tels, ou elle fait entendre des sujets non comptés, etc.]

*Labour and work, or more precisely the refusal of the worker to subsume themselves under the title 'worker', have been at the centre of your work. I wonder what you think of the recent attempts to problematise or overturn the 'traditional' model of the worker, primarily by Italian thinkers, through such concepts as 'immaterial labour' or 'precarity'. (BN)*

I have in fact always insisted on the difference between worker or proletarian subjectivation and all forms of economic, social or cultural identification of the worker which seek to

tablished system of the division of competencies. Changing the fabric of sensibility means firstly the disruption of places and capacities. This is what happens when artists blur the border supposedly separating fiction from documentary — for example, when a director like Pedro Costa transforms an unemployed immigrant worker into a kind of King Lear (*Colossal Youth*), or when Lebanese directors like Kalil Joreige and Joana Hadjithomas treat the civil war and foreign oppression not by way of stories of violence and death but by way of stories of a film that has disappeared or of the impossibility of developing the negatives (*Le Film disparu*). They thus attest to the capacity for interplay of groups confined in the category of victims to be pitied by the dominant logic. It is also what happens when a man of the theatre like John Malpede mobilises as actors the members of a disinherited community in Los Angeles. These are three examples amongst a thousand others. The political virtue of art takes effect when it blurs the borders separating it from non-art (which is not the same thing as the will to ‘achieve’ art in suppressing it, which marked the era of the great avant-garde ventures). It is clear that similar effects can be produced in other domains with regard to the distribution of knowledges or the production and diffusion of information. It is, for example, what happens today with the internet: an explosion of perspectives at the heart of which information is channelled. And for me political action itself is an aesthetic activity to the extent that it makes us see as political, things not recognised as such, as when we are made to hear subjects left out of account, etc.

[Je ne privilegie pas la position de l’artiste en tant qu’artiste. J’essaie de redefinir en quoi les pratiques de l’art peuvent avoir un role politique. Elles l’ont justement quand elles brisent le systeme etabli de repartition des domaines et des competences. La modification du tissu sensible, cela veut dire d’abord ce bouleversement des places et des capacites. C’est ce qui se passe quand des artistes brouillent les frontieres qui sont

system, their system of political power crumbles with remarkable rapidity.

‘Authoritarian societies are like formation skating,’ V observes, ‘intricate, mechanically precise and above all, precarious’ (197). This recalls Jean Baudrillard’s assertion that the secret of power is that it doesn’t exist (*Fatal Strategies* 80). Indeed, V even invokes Baudrillard’s concept of simulation to describe the nature of power in post-apocalyptic Britain: ‘in a bureaucracy, the file cards *are* reality’ (Moore and Lloyd 218).

The good news here is that if V is right, then the apparently unstoppable monolith of British state power is in fact little more than a precarious house of file cards. If power in the post-modern world is based largely upon illusion and the creative manipulation of reality, then revolutionaries have a clear and effective strategy available to them. They need only seize the engines of simulation, puncture the veil of illusion, and replace the official discourse with a radical alternative narrative. This is precisely V’s strategy. V chooses to commemorate the ‘contribution’ of the ‘great citizen’ Guy Fawkes by destroying Jordan Tower and the old post office, putting the state’s machinery of propaganda and surveillance out of commission (186–7). This is only part of V’s assault on the cybernetic machinery which underwrites contemporary state power. In a fascinating subplot, we learn that the fascist dictator, Adam Susan, is actually a repressed virgin who is in love with the massive Fate computer which monitors the lives of every English subject. ‘He hungers in his secret dreams for the harsh embrace of cruel machines’ (91). One of V’s most significant victories is his ‘seduction’ of the Fate computer (201). In the discourse of the postmodern ‘hacker’ subculture, this might be known as a ‘white hat intrusion’: an unauthorised incursion into a networked system, for socially responsible purposes.

V also promotes postmodern anarchism by consistently and deliberately challenging the concept of the normal individual. As Michel Foucault has shown, this concept is a crucial

part of the apparatus by which the modern state retains and enhances its power.<sup>5</sup> V argues that ‘normal’ individuals were largely responsible for the success of fascism. ‘We’ve had a string of embezzlers, frauds, liars and lunatics making a string of catastrophic decisions,’ says V in his pirate television broadcast (116). (He speaks against a backdrop which shows images of Hitler, Stalin and Mussolini.) ‘But who elected them?’ he demands in the next panel. In this panel, David Lloyd presents the standard British ‘nuclear family’: overweight father with a pint of lager in hand, passive mother, two disinterested children, all sat round the telly. ‘It was you!’ declares V ‘You who appointed these people! You who gave them the power to make your decisions for you!’ (117). The argument reminds us of the Frankfurt School’s interpretation of fascism, particularly as articulated by Erich Fromm in *Fear of Freedom*: we surrender our freedoms to the fascists willingly, even eagerly, because we are terrified by the thought of pure individual freedom. ‘The situation is under control, and citizens are advised to carry on their business precisely as *normal*,’ declares the fascist state, as London descends into looting and rioting (191). Here the fascists are clearly desperate to maintain the appearance of normality, but V makes it abundantly clear that ‘the normal’ is now nothing more than an empty facade. Lloyd makes this argument very effectively in visual terms, with a series of three panels which show the same ‘Supersavers’ shop front (191). The first panel shows apparently passive ‘normal’ citizens in front of the shop as fascist shock troops approach. The second panel shows the same citizens as the troops march past. The third panel shows no people at all, just the shop with its windows smashed and its commodities looted.

<sup>5</sup> For example: ‘The campaign against drugs is a pretext for the reinforcement of social repression; not only through police raids, but also through the indirect exaltation of the normal, rational, conscientious, and well-adjusted individual’ (Foucault, ‘Revolutionary Action: “Until Now”’ 226).

ete une contestation generalisee de toutes les formes d’authorite qui structurent le corps social. Il faut reaffirmer le caractere politique et collectif de cette critique, car toute la pensee du retour a l’ordre des annees 80 s’est acharnee a identifier la critique anti-autoritaire a une attitude individualiste de jeunes gens desireux de s’affranchir des formes d’authorite qui les empechaient de jouir de toutes les promesses nouvelles de la marchandise et de la vie transformee en marchandise. Cette critique a ete reprise par Sarkozy, mais il faut bien voir qu’elle a ete essentiellement elaboree par des gens de gauche: militants dequus transformant leurs esperances dequus en ressentiment; socialistes de gouvernement presses de recueillir l’heritage des annees de contestation tout en effaquant son tranchant; marxistes orthodoxes ou sociologues de l’ecole de Bourdieu, depites de voir en 1968 leur science balayee par l’»ideologie « des etudiants et heureux de pouvoir apres coup demontrer que cette agitation non autorisee par la science avait ouvert la voie pour la renovation d’un capitalisme en difficulte, etc. La fidelite a Mai 68 aujourd’hui, cela veut dire la fidelite a la puissance de subversion collective du mouvement anti-autoritaire.]

*In an interview published in Artforum in 2007<sup>2</sup> you seemed to privilege the position of the artist in two ways: first that the dispersion of the role of artist indicated a new shifting of roles and competencies. Second that the artist, in their work, could make a ‘modification of the fabric of the sensible’. Do you think there are any other sites or forms of agency that can perform similar tasks? (BN)*

I do not privilege the position of the artist as artist. I am trying to redefine what in art practices enables them to have a political role, as they indeed do when they break up the es-

<sup>2</sup> Fulvia Carnevale and John Kelsey in Conversation with Jacques Ranciere, ‘Art of the Possible’, *Artforum* (March 2007): 256–259, 261–264, 266–267, 269.

*In the wake of the fortieth anniversary of the events and the French President Nicolas Sarkozy's claim that the heritage of May 68 must be liquidated, what do you think the legacy of the events is? Is it necessary to maintain fidelity to May '68 and if so to what in the heterogeneous actions that composed it? (BN)*

For me, the heritage of May 68 is simply the heritage of democratic politics as I understand it. May 68 was firstly an affirmation of the capacity of all to take in hand the common destiny as opposed to the idea which merges democracy and the oligarchical management of the State. It was a generalised contestation of all forms of authority which structure the social body. The political and collective character of this critique should be reaffirmed, because the whole idea of a return to order in the 1980s is a desperate attempt to identify an anti-authoritarian critique with an individualist attitude of young people desirous of escaping forms of authority which prevent them from enjoying the new promises of commodities and of life turned into a commodity. This criticism has been revived by Sarkozy, but it is necessary to see that it was essentially elaborated by people of the left: by disappointed activists who turned the failure of their hopes into resentment; by socialists in government anxious to cultivate the heritage of the years of contestation while entirely erasing its impact; by orthodox Marxists or sociologists of Bourdieu's school, furious to see, in 1968, their science swept away by the 'ideology' of the students and happy afterwards to show that this agitation, not authorised by science, had opened the way for the renovation of a capitalism in difficulty, etc. Fidelity to May 68 today means fidelity to the power of collective subversion of the anti-authoritarian movement.

[L'heritage de Mai 68 pour moi, c'est tout simplement l'heritage de la politique democratique telle que je l'entends. Mai 68 a ete d'abord une affirmation de la capacite de tous a prendre en mains le destin commun a l'oppose de l'idee qui assimile la democratie a la gestion oligarchique d'Etat. Cela a

V's postmodern, anarchistic challenge to 'the normal' becomes most clear in its portrayal of fascist homophobia. One of V's most moving segments is the narrative of Valerie, a lesbian who is imprisoned and tortured by the fascist regime. Valerie tells us that shortly after the fascist takeover 'they started rounding up the gays' (159). 'Why are they so frightened of us?' she demands (159). It is an excellent question. The answer, perhaps, is that gays and lesbians represent a symbolic threat to the fascist system of representation. Gay and lesbian identities and systems of signification stand in direct opposition to the homogenous concept of normality which is such a crucial component of fascism's symbolic regime.

This subversive challenge to the normal also suggests some interesting strategies of resistance. V eventually imprisons Evey in a simulation of a fascist prison. (If fascist authority is based upon maintaining the illusion of power, then it becomes possible for others to appropriate that authority by developing illusions of their own. V's decision to do so is, of course, ethically questionable, and this problematises his entire political project in an interesting way.) V subjects Evey to months of physical and psychological torture. When she finally discovers the truth about her situation, Evey confronts V: 'you say you want to set me free and you put me in a prison ...' (168). V replies, 'you were already in a prison. You've been in a prison all your life.' And a little bit later, 'I didn't put you in a prison, Evey. I just showed you the bars' (170). Here V develops a radical postmodern argument: the oppressive power of the fascist state (and the modern state more generally) does not lie in the ability of these states to deploy conventional forms of political and economic power. Rather, the truly terrifying power of fascist states (and of all modern states) lies in the ability of these states to enforce a certain perception of the world. The only effective way to challenge fascism, V argues, is to attack that perception. This requires the development and articulation of a radical

symbolic politics, something dramatic enough to overcome the entire fascist structure of representation. V accomplishes this through questionable methods, but in the end Evey comes to understand her experience as transformative and

liberating. Statist critics will be tempted to dismiss Evey's transformation as a mere manifestation of 'Stockholm syndrome,' but this is too simple. David Lloyd provides the clues in a heavily visual, psychedelic sequence which illustrates Evey's reaction to V's death. Evey finally rejects the dialectic: V may be a big idea, but he still needs to be a person. With trembling hands, Evey begins to unmask him. When she lifts away his 'maddening smile,' the Guy Fawkes grin is replaced by the frightened face of little girl Evey. 'And at last I know,' Evey concludes. 'I know who V must be' (250). The following page is entirely visual, with no text: Alan Moore takes a back seat, to allow Lloyd to make the symbolic argument. Evey slowly makes her way to V's dressing table, gazes at herself in the mirror, and then smiles the Fawkes smile at herself. Evey is not simply in love with V, she is *becoming* V. This is possible (even easy) because V has always been something that anyone can be: just a Guy.

## **2006: Transatlantic Postmodern Anarchism in the McTeigue/Wachowski *V for Vendetta***

The 2006 film adaptation of *V for Vendetta* has received plenty of critical abuse. Alan Moore was so dismayed with the film's direction that he had his name taken off the project. Among other things, Moore objected to the filmmakers' decision to turn the story into a 'Bush-era parable' (quoted in Xenakis 135). But what else could they do? Although the Wachowskis had been interested in the project since the 80s, it didn't get off the ground until the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. By

parties. But this implies thinking the thing that historical anarchism judged contradictory: an anarchist political thought, an idea of anarchism as practical politics.

[Il n'y a pas a ma connaissance de theorie anarchiste procurant un cadre global d'intelligibilite du monde et des moyens de sa transformation. Et toute la question est de savoir s'il doit y en avoir une. L'anarchisme historique a oscille entre deux attitudes fondamentales: d'un cote, il a oppose la capacite d'invention des hommes associes aux schemas de l'evolution historique avances par la science marxiste. De l'autre il s'est presente lui-meme, dans la tradition proudhonienne, comme porteur de la vraie science sociale, de la formule sociale de l'avenir a appliquer. Je ne suis pas sur que les references que vous citez definissent reellement une avancee par rapport a cette oscillation historique. Guy Debord, malgre toute son ironie a l'egard du marxisme d'Etat, a une vision du processus historique et du role de l'avant-garde entierement conforme a la tradition marxiste. Murray Bookchin, lui, me semble perpetuer la vision organiciste a laquelle l'anarchisme a ete souvent liee, la vision selon laquelle la societe juste serait comme une vegetation naturelle, bien enracinee dans son sol. Cela veut dire aussi qu'il presente la solution anarchiste comme la formule dont l'application estensee remedier au mal etatique. Je ne crois pas, pour mon compte, aux formules d'avenir a appliquer. Je crois que ce sont les formes presentes d'opposition a l'ordre existant qui developpent les formes futures d'etre-en commun. La critique anarchiste et les formes d'association liees a la tradition anarchiste prennent certainement une importance nouvelle dans la faillite du marxisme d'Etat et des partis socialistes. Mais cela suppose de penser cette chose que l'anarchisme historique a jugee contradictoire: une pensee politique de l'anarchisme, une pensee de l'anarchisme comme pratique politique.]

*The May 68 events were obviously highly significant for your critique of mastery and your intellectual and political formation.*



*Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the embrace of capitalism in China, progressive movements, particularly in the US, have turned away from Marxist theory. Many have begun to find roots in anarchism, both in the classical anarchists of the nineteenth century and more recent manifestations, for example in the thought of Guy Debord and the environmentalist Murray Bookchin. Do you see anarchist theory as providing a framework within which to conceive progressive political thought and action in today's globalised world? (TM)*

There is, to my knowledge, no anarchist theory providing a global framework of intelligibility of the world and its transformation. And the real question is to know if we should have one. Historical anarchism oscillated between two fundamental attitudes: on the one hand it brought together the capacity for inventiveness of humans in association with schemas of historical evolution advanced by Marxist science. On the other, it presented itself, in the proudhonian tradition, as the bearer of true social science, and of a social formula ready for future application. I am not sure that the references that you cite really describe an advance in relation to this historical oscillation. Guy Debord, despite all his irony with regard to State Marxism, had a vision of the historical process and of the role of the avant-garde conforming entirely to the Marxist tradition. Murray Bookchin, for his part, seems to me to perpetuate the organicist vision to which anarchism has often been linked, a vision according to which the just society would be like a natural vegetable well embedded in its soil. This also means that he presents the anarchist solution as the application of a formula which is supposed to be a cure for the sickness of the state. I, for my part, do not believe in phrases ready-made for future application. I believe that there are current forms of opposition to the existing order which are developing future forms of being in common. The anarchist critique and forms of association linked to the anarchist tradition certainly take on a new importance since the failure of State Marxism and socialist

then, Moore's modernist cautionary tale about late Cold War politics was no longer relevant. By necessity, the Wachowskis told a new story, one that made sense in the symbolic universe which came into existence after 11 September 2001. Clearly they struck a nerve, particularly on the right. 'If you believe that the entire edifice of the war on terror is built on lies and more lies, then *V for Vendetta* is for you,' thunders John Podhoretz, chief enforcer of the American right. The problem for people like Podhoretz — and it's an increasingly serious problem — is that large numbers of Americans and even larger numbers of non-Americans believe exactly that.

A more serious critique comes from the left wing of science fiction criticism. Citing the work of Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, Lucius Shepard has argued that the Wachowskis' 1999 film '*The Matrix* pretended a revolutionary stance, but was essentially a highly successful marketing device, the corporate entity affecting a kind of unity with the consumer class, thereby weakening the entire concept of revolution' (122). For Shepard, '*V for Vendetta* may be more of the same' (122). Certainly *V* is a slick, pretty, big budget Hollywood film. But Shepard is too quick to assume that the film therefore has nothing radical to offer. He dismisses first-time director James McTeigue as a 'thumb-puppet' of the Wachowskis, but in fact McTeigue shows a surprising political sophistication. 'It's politically ambiguous, and the more credit and intelligence you give the audience, the better,' says McTeigue of his film (quoted in Lyall). McTeigue clearly recognised the radical potential inherent in *V*'s subversive, ambiguous system of representation, and this is not really surprising. After all, McTeigue had worked with the Wachowskis as assistant director on *The Matrix*. That film showed a strong interest in postmodern philosophy generally and Baudrillard's theory of simulation in particular. In *V for Vendetta*, McTeigue and the Wachowskis continued to explore that interest, this time

in starkly political terms. The result is a striking cinematic argument for postmodern anarchism.

A few critics on the postmodern left have actually recognised the film's radical potential; these critics generally emphasise the film's treatment of sexuality. 'V is an adventure fantasy that touches the pleasure centers,' argues Richard Goldstein. 'Because it evokes the erotics of resistance, this film is a significant event despite its aesthetic limits.' When the film version of V interrogates the intersection of sexuality and politics, it is actually *more* radical than the comic book. Adam B. Vary emphasises that the film was deliberately more provocative and more radical in its portrayal of sexuality than was the comic book. He quotes McTeigue: 'I think in some ways the graphic novel was a victim of its time in how to express homosexuality.' As Vary notes, the filmmakers broadened *V for Vendetta's* representational horizons by changing the sexual orientation of the Deitrich character from straight to gay.

The film begins by explicitly embracing the post-structuralist possibilities of the Guy Fawkes image, which Moore and Lloyd had already begun to explore in the comic book. We see a brief historical recreation of the Gunpowder Plot. In a voice-over which already suggests what Goldstein has rightly identified as the film's 'erotics of resistance,' Evey (Natalie Portman) provides a useful pocket historiography for the audience: 'I know his name was Guy Fawkes and I know in 1605 he attempted to blow up the Houses of Parliament' (009).<sup>6</sup> Evey already knows more than most people, but never mind. Her voice-over assures us that our cultural inability to remember exactly what we celebrate on the 5<sup>th</sup> of November is not an insurmountable political obstacle. Indeed, in a postmodern political environment, the fact that Fawkes's

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<sup>6</sup> All dialogue quotations are taken from the shooting script which appears in Wachowski Brothers and James McTeigue, *V for Vendetta: From Script to Film*.

de l'illegitimite de la domination et la pratique de la mise en reuvre de la capacite du plus grand nombre. Et l'anarchisme ouvrier du 19<sup>e</sup> siecle s'est enracine dans les pratiques qui ont associe les formes de la lutte a l'invention de formes d'organisation du travail et d'echange anticipant sur le futur. Ce lien entre l'anarchisme et la demonstration de la capacite du plus grand nombre est tres important pour moi et s'oppose aux tendances professorales et scientifiques qui ont affecte par ailleurs la tradition anarchiste, avec les theoriciens pretendant apporter la bonne formule de l'avenir social. Cela dit, il y a entre « mon » anarchisme et la tradition anarchiste une difference de perspective qui est importante. La tradition anarchiste a eu tendance a localiser l'oppression dans l'Etat en identifiant politique et Etat, et a y opposer une liberte incarnee dans la societe, dans le groupe social producteur. L'anarchisme historique s'appuie volontiers sur l'opposition entre la realite de la production et des echanges et le parasitisme des formes etatiques. Cette vision est assez proche de l'opposition marxiste entre la realite economique et sociale et l'apparence politique. Et elle se nourrit d'une certaine conception organiciste ou la cellule sociale comme organisme vivant est oppose a l'artifice politique. Je suis tres eloigne de cette vision naturaliste. Ce que j'ai essaye de mettre en lumiere, c'est une anarchie qui est impliquee dans la definition meme de la politique et qui la distingue justement de tout organicisme. J'ai essaye de montrer que dans l'idee meme du gouvernement politique, il y a une reference necessaire a une competence qui n'est plus celle d'une categorie specifique mais celle de tous. Il y a une rupture de la logique de l'*arkhe* selon laquelle l'exercice du pouvoir est l'exercice de la competence propre d'une categorie specifique. Bien sur cet « anarchisme » premier au creur de la politique est constamment recouvert par les pratiques de gouvernement et la democratie n'existe que par l'activite de sujets qui le reactivent, qui creent une scene commune differente de la scene publique officielle.]

tury was embedded in the practices associated with forms of struggle to invent forms of organisation of work and exchange that anticipate the future. This link between anarchism and the demonstration of the capacity of the greatest number is very important for me and is opposed to professorial and scientific tendencies — which have, in other respects, affected the anarchist tradition — with theoreticians claiming to provide the right slogan for our social future. That said, between ‘my’ anarchism and the anarchist tradition there is an important difference of perspective. The anarchist tradition had a tendency to localise oppression in the State by identifying politics and the State, and opposed this to liberty incarnated in society in the social group of producers. Historical anarchism freely relied on the opposition between production and exchange and the parasitism of forms of the State. This vision is quite close to the Marxist opposition between economic and social reality and politics as appearance. And it fed on a certain organicist conception where the social cell as a living organism is opposed to political artifice. I am a long way from this naturalist vision. What I have tried to bring to light is an anarchy implicated in the very definition of politics and which precisely distinguishes it from all organicism. I have tried to show that in the very idea of political government there is a necessary reference to a competence which is no longer that of a specific category but that of all (*tous*). There is a break with the *arche* logic according to which the exercise of power is the exercise of competence proper to a specific category. Of course this primary ‘anarchism’ at the heart of politics is constantly rediscovered by the practices of government, and democracy only exists through the activity of subjects who reactivate it, which creates a communal sphere different from the official public sphere.

[Il y a certainement un lien entre ma conception de l’anarchie et la tradition anti-autoritaire portée par l’anarchisme historique. L’an-archie, c’est en general la pensee

face stubbornly and persistently refuses to attach itself to any specific signification may be interpreted positively, as an indication that the Fawkes image can be redeployed for whatever subversive purposes are appropriate to the current historical moment. ‘We are told to remember the idea and not the man because a man can fail,’ Evey continues. ‘He can be caught, he can be killed, and forgotten. But four hundred years later, an idea can still change the world.’ The film then identifies the problem inherent in the dialectical approach to revolution. ‘But you cannot kiss an idea,’ the disembodied voice of Evey asserts, while on screen the face of Guy is framed in a noose. ‘You cannot touch it, or hold it’ (010). Remarkably, the film even provides a solution to this problem. It does this by eroticising the idea called V This rescues V from the dry, dull land of the dialectic. Subsequent events will cause us to re-read a wonderful irony into Evey’s critique. By the end of the teaser, the audience understands that some unspecified idea which looks like this Guy is going to change the world. By the end of the film, we may believe that one *can* kiss this idea.

Film is a very effective medium for the kind of visual politics which *V for Vendetta* clearly desires. The film is able to do much more with media, particularly television, than Moore and Lloyd could do. When V seizes control of Jordan Tower to broadcast his message of subversion, a delightful logo appears in the lower right hand corner of every video screen in fascist Britain. It is V’s signature symbol (the V inscribed within a circle) followed by the letters TV The V is, of course, a thinly disguised, inverted anarchy symbol. The addition of ‘TV’ is a playful postmodern move, which invokes such networks as MTV. Critics on the modernist left will see this as further evidence of the film’s alliance with corporate values, but I propose a different reading. V uses a system of symbolic representation which he knows his media-saturated audience will comprehend (and so, for that matter, will the audience of *V for Vendetta*). He does

this of necessity, to ensure that there is at least the possibility that his words will be heard. V intends, after all, to deliver a brief introductory lecture on post-structuralist politics, and so it behoves him to begin by giving his audiences something familiar. Sounding rather like Foucault, V declares that ‘while the truncheon may be used in lieu of conversation, words will always retain their power’ (037). V continues: ‘Words offer the means to meaning and for those who will listen, the enunciation of truth’ (038). His own choice of words is, of course, significant. If words offer not meaning but the *means* to meaning, that suggests that meaning is something which we construct for ourselves. Similarly, V speaks not of truth but of the *enunciation* of truth, suggesting that truth does not exist prior to the speech act: an extreme structuralism. Towards the end of his speech, V reveals that this structuralism is allied with Nietzsche, and is thus almost certainly Foucauldian. As in the graphic novel, V declares Guy Fawkes a ‘great citizen.’ But the Wachowskis’ V adds these words, which do not appear in Moore’s version: ‘His hope was to remind the world that fairness, justice and freedom were more than words. They are perspectives’ (041). Here V reveals a perspectivist ethics: his post-structuralist rejection of all absolute meaning does not imply a meaningless relativism, but rather a perspectivism which may still evaluate various viewpoints, and endorse those which promote progressive values.

Indeed, V seems very concerned to promote ethics in language. The Wachowskis add this to the monologue of Valerie, the victim of fascist homophobia: ‘I remember how the meaning of words began to change. How unfamiliar words like “collateral” and “extraordinary rendition” became frightening’ (114). Alan Moore has denounced the film for making these references to post-9/11 political culture, but this is how the film remains relevant. Moore’s Cold War is over. We are now embroiled in a War on Terror, and this war, even more than that one, is fought on the terrain of

specifique detenue par une population specifique [...] le roi, les «meilleurs», les savants ou les pretres sont censes gouverner au nom meme de leur qualite. Le peuple, lui, gouverne au nom de cette absence de qualite. C’est le principe de l’arche : ceux qui commandent sont ceux qui ont en eux le principe qui y donne droit. Le pouvoir du peuple, lui, est anarchique en son principe, car c’est l’affirmation du pouvoir de n’importe qui, de ceux qui n’ont pas de titre a l’occuper. C’est donc l’affirmation de l’illegitimite derniere de la domination. Ce pouvoir-la ne peut jamais etre institutionnalise. Il peut en revanche etre pratique, mis en acte par des collectifs politiques. Mais precisement ceux-ci agissent en exces sur la scene publique officielle qui est celle du pouvoir de petites oligarchies exerce au nom du peuple. L’action democratique fait intervenir des sujets supplementaires par rapport a la simple figure du citoyen electeur represente dans l’ordre institutionnel, et ces sujets interviennent dans des lieux qui ne sont pas ceux des pouvoirs executif et representatif (la rue, le lieu de travail, l’Ecole, etc.); ils y font entendre d’autres voix, ils y font voir d’autres objets. Donc il y a bien une inscription institutionnelle du « pouvoir du peuple », mais a partir de la il ya opposition entre une logique etatique qui est une logique de restriction de ce pouvoir, de privatisation de la chose publique et une logique politique democratique qui vise au contraire a etendre ce pouvoir par ses formes propres d’action.]

*In La Haine de la democratie you say that democracy is anarchic, in the specific sense that it is “based on nothing other than the absence of every title to govern” (English translation, p. 41) Are there threads within the anarchist theoretical tradition that you ’re thinking of here, and if so, what are they? (TM)*

There is certainly a link between my conception of anarchy and the antiauthoritarian tradition of historical anarchism. Anarchy in general is the doctrine of the illegitimacy of domination and the practice of bringing into play the capacity of the greatest number. Workers’ anarchism of the nineteenth cen-

ple which gives them the right to command.<sup>1</sup> The power of the people itself is anarchic in principle, for it is the affirmation of the power of anyone, of those who have no title to it. It is thus the affirmation of the ultimate illegitimacy of domination. Such power can never be institutionalized. It can, on the other hand, be practised, enacted by political collectives. But the latter precisely act beyond legal authority on the official public stage which is the power, exercised in the name of the people, of petty oligarchies. Democratic action allows the intervention of subjects who are supplementary in relation to the simple figure of the citizen electorate represented in the constitutional order, and these subjects intervene in places other than those of executive and representative power (the street, workplace, school, etc.); they give rise to other voices and other objects. Therefore there is indeed an institutional inscription of the ‘power of the people’, but in light of that there is an opposition between state logic, which is a logic of the restriction and the privatisation of the public sphere, and democratic political logic which, on the contrary, aims to extend this power through its own forms of action.

[Ce que je veux dire, c’est qu’elle ne peut jamais s’identifier à un système de formes constitutionnelles. L’idée et la pratique démocratique peuvent assurément inspirer et animer des formes constitutionnelles et des modes de vie publics. Mais elles ne peuvent jamais s’y incarner sans reste, parce que le demos est d’emblée double. D’un côté, il est le collectif qui est la source de la légitimité du pouvoir. En ce sens «démocratie» désigne le système des formes qui actualisent ce pouvoir du peuple dans des textes, institutions et pratiques institutionnelles. Il désigne une certaine souveraineté, du même type que celle du monarque ou des «meilleurs» (aristocratie). Mais en même temps, le demos est le sujet qui ruine l’idée même de souveraineté en rumant le principe qui le lie à une qualité

<sup>1</sup> *Arche* means both ‘command’ and ‘origin’ -Tr.

language. Nor is that the only war we face. ‘I remember how “different” became “dangerous,”’ says the Wachowskis’ Valerie (115). The film plays up fascism’s homophobia much more than the book did. In the film version, different *is* dangerous, for difference (especially the sexual kind) has the potential to undermine the delicate symbolic system within which the fascist order is inscribed. The film makes an important and courageous decision, to portray alternate sexualities as a powerful antidote to the enforced cultural conformity which fascism requires. One is reminded of Deleuze and Guattari’s anti-fascist desiring machines. One is also reminded that the writer formerly known as Larry Wachowski is now Laurence, a pre-operative transsexual ‘living under the domination of a professional sadist named Mistress Ilsa Strix’ (Podhoretz). Podhoretz asserts that *V* ‘might have been subversive’ if it had been faithful to Laurence’s erotic leanings, but as usual, he has it exactly wrong. *V* is subversive, precisely because it *is* faithful to Laurence’s new radical sexuality: not in its form, but in its marginality, its Otherness. *V*’s body, like Laurence’s, is radically unorthodox. It is this difference which makes *V* dangerous, and this is the difference which Evey loves. The representation of *V* may not be explicitly transgendered, but there is certainly a radical sexual ambiguity about *V*, and this is clearly part of his power.

To this potent post-structural perspectivism, *V* adds a kind of absurdist Situationism. This pushes the film into a fullblown postmodern politics. *V* employs absurdist satire as a way to critique the War on Terror. Deitrich (Stephen Fry) hosts a variety show on the state-run television network. In a particularly hilarious segment, *V* is ‘revealed’ to be an evil clone of fascist dictator Adam Sutler; several Sutler clones then chase each other around the stage in a bizarre ‘Benny Hill’ routine, complete with theme music. This is a good place to remember that *V* actually maintains a high level of realism; although set in the near future, it contains no fantastic elements. *V*’s world

is very much our world. And so a program like this reminds us of what television *could* do in our world, but *does not* do. In private, Deitrich is even more subversive. In his secret cellar, he keeps a number of forbidden works, including a picture called 'God Save the Queen,' which features the face of Chancellor Sutler transposed onto a portrait of the Queen. McTeigue has said that this painting was inspired by the graphic design work that Jamie Reid did for the Sex Pistols; McTeigue also mentions Reid's French Situationist influence (Wachowski Brothers and McTeigue 241). References to punk culture and Situationism indicate that the film is also more sophisticated than the book (and again, more radical) in its symbolic political vocabulary. The destruction of Parliament was a curiously minor event in the Moore/Lloyd comic; Goldstein points out that in the film, it becomes an 'enticing image of iconoclastic anarchism [which] recalls the punk values that were central to youth culture until they gave way to patriotic posturing after 9/11.'

In Alan Moore's story, V blew up Parliament at the beginning of the narrative. His big target at the end of the story was 10 Downing Street, because Moore was writing against a particular manifestation of modern state power in the late Cold War. McTeigue and the Wachowskis made the destruction of Parliament the finale of their film, because they were launching a more ambitious postmodern assault upon the symbolic foundations of the modern state. Liberal critics hasten to join conservatives in denouncing this project. *The New Yorker's* David Denby laments the fact that the film ends up 'celebrating an attack against an icon of liberal democracy' and concludes that *V* is an 'allegedly antifascist work' which 'lusts after fire and death.' But the film's point is precisely that Parliament is a symbol as slippery as Guy Fawkes: it can represent the excesses of state power as easily as it can symbolise that convenient abstraction, 'liberal democracy.' In order to secure permission from the relevant officials to film the destruction of Parliament, location supervisor Nick Daubeny 'dwelled on the dangers of

## Democracy, anarchism and radical politics today: An interview with Jacques Ranciere

TODD MAY, BENJAMIN NOYS & SAUL NEWMAN,  
TRANSLATED BY JOHN LECHTE

*In La Mesentente, you argue that democracy cannot be institutionalised. Can you clarify what you mean by this and why you think it cannot be institutionalised? (TM)*

What I mean is that it can never be identified with a system of constitutional forms. Democratic ideas and practices can of course inspire and animate constitutional forms and modes of public life. But these can never incarnate democracy because the demos is immediately double. On the one hand, it is the collective, which is the source of power's legitimacy. In this sense 'democracy' designates the system of forms actualizing the power of the people in texts, institutions and institutional practices. It designates a certain sovereignty, one similar to that of the monarch or 'superior class' (aristocracy). But at the same time, the demos is the subject who even undermines the idea of sovereignty by undermining the principle binding it to specific positions of a specific population [such as ...] a king, a superior class, savants or priests who are supposed to govern in the name of this position itself. For its part, the people govern in the absence of these positions. This is the principle of *arche*: those who command are those who possess the princi-

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the totalitarian state and the fact that this is a restoration of democracy' (quoted in Lyall). Thus the film embraces the flexibility and ambiguity of its symbolism. And *V* manages to maintain a strong sense of ethics through all this ambiguity. Tony Williams is quite right to argue that 'although several commentators have condemned *V* for its supposed support of 9/11 and terrorist bombers, *V* actually blows up buildings which are empty. He also follows Bakunin's anarchist philosophy that an act of destruction can also be creative' (19). *V* is explicit about his symbolic politics. 'The building is a symbol, as is the act of destroying it. Symbols are given power by people. Alone a symbol is meaningless, but with enough people, blowing up a building can change the world' (056). Here the radical post-structuralism of the film is made strikingly manifest. The symbol is defined as radically fluid. Its meaning is infinitely flexible, and that meaning is articulated as the symbol works its way through its cultural environment.

*V* explains all this to Evey; in the very next scene, he goes to assassinate Prothero, the fascist 'Voice of London.' Prothero is watching himself on TV As *V* approaches, the televised Prothero is telling his audience the 'moral of the story:' 'Good guys win, bad guys lose and as always, England prevails' (060). Four centuries after the Gunpowder Plot, the British state still struggles to maintain its shaky hold on power by defining different sorts of Guys. In the film, the state loses this struggle, and with it any claim to authority. *V* invites the citizens of London to don their own Guy Fawkes masks. At the end of the film, what happened to our language happens on screen: everyone becomes a Guy. London is transformed into a city of Guys: a vast sea of enigmatic, smiling Fawkes faces. This is a radical departure from the conclusion of Moore's book, in which Evey lifts the mask from the dead *V* and decides to carry on his struggle, as a classic libertarian individual in the modernist mould. 'He was all of us,' the film's Evey concludes in a voice-over (168). Williams is right to call this conclusion

a considerable improvement over the original (23). Moore's *Bildungsroman* may have been an inspirational story about one woman's journey to political engagement, but the film is something more than that: a postmodern narrative about a subversive political symbolism which can spread through a culture like a virus or meme, rewriting that culture as it goes. The film's emotional climax actually occurs just *before* the destruction of Parliament, when Evey finally kisses V. Here the audience is treated to an inspirational sight: Evey's beautiful lips, caressing the lifeless features of a Guy Fawkes mask. Evey loves the meme. She loves the symbol, its power, and the way V has wielded this power to give Britain a fighting chance for freedom. It's no surprise that liberal critics turn away from this scene in revulsion. 'Sure, Evey tells him he's a monster — and then tries to make out with his mask,' grumbles *Newsweek's* Jeff Giles. 'In a movie, when the pretty girl falls in love with you and stays in love with you, you're a hero.' But what does the pronoun 'you' refer to here? Not a man, surely, but rather a Guy, a guy who gets the girl — then becomes the girl, and finally becomes everyone.

Some critics may argue that the *V for Vendetta* film is unfaithful to the book, while others may wonder if either the film or the book has anything to do with the Gunpowder Plot of 1605. But all of these critics miss the most interesting point. The symbol of Guy Fawkes is important precisely because it is never faithful to itself. It is the grinning face that looks in the mirror and says, with Foucault, 'do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same: leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order' (*Archaeology of Knowledge* 17). Anarchists, particularly of the postmodern and post-structuralist sort, should celebrate the existence of this face, this Guy. The face of Fawkes does not offer a specific political message of brief and dubious relevance. Instead, it offers something much more useful: a subversive system of symbolic representation. The work of McTeigue and the Wachowskis,

like that of Moore and Lloyd, confirms this system's longstanding anarchist pedigree. The face of Fawkes now stands ready for further deployment in the twenty-first century.

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