

# Is Post-Structuralist Political Theory Anarchist?

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I would like to say something about the function of any diagnosis concerning the nature of the present...Any description must always be made in accordance with these kinds of virtual fracture which open up the space of freedom understood as a space of concrete freedom, i.e. of possible transformation.

— **Michel Foucault**<sup>1</sup>

...obviously a whole series of partial and incomplete victories, of concessions won from the holders of power, will not lead to an anarchist society. But it will widen the scope of free action and the potentiality for freedom in the society we have.

— **Colin Ward**<sup>2</sup>

The difficulty in evaluating the political philosophy of the French post-structuralists — Foucault, Deleuze, and Lyotard in particular — is inseparable from the difficulty in understanding what their general political philosophy is. That they have rejected Marxism as an adequate account of our social and political situation is clear. But what they have substituted for it is still a subject of contention. This is because, rather than offering a general political theory, the post-structuralists have instead given us specific analyses of concrete situations of oppression. From Foucault's *Histoire de la Folie* to Lyotard's *The Differend*, the focus has been upon madness, sexuality, psychoanalysis, language, the unconscious, art, etc., but not upon a unified account of what politics is or how it should be conducted in the contemporary world.

This absence or refusal of a general political theory has led some critics to accuse the post-structuralists of a self-defeating normative relativism or outright nihilism.<sup>3</sup> The question these

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<sup>1</sup> Foucault, Michel. "Structuralism and Post-structuralism: An Interview with Michel Foucault," (conducted by Gerard Raulet), *Telos* 55, Spring 1983, p. 206.

<sup>2</sup> Ward, Colin. *Anarchy in Action* (London, Allen and Unwin: 1973), p. 138.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. ex., Peter Dews, *Logics of Disintegration* (London, Verso: 1987) and Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge, MIT Press: 1987; translated by Frederick Lawrence) on normative relativism and J.G. Merquior, *Foucault* (Berkeley, University of California Press: 1985) on nihilism. For accounts of the Habermas-Lyotard debate for which this is a core issue, see David Ingram, "Legitimacy and the Post-Modern Condition: The Political Thought of Jean-Francois Lyotard" in *Praxis International*, Vol. 7, #3-4, Winter 1987-88, pp. 286-305 and

critics raise is this: if the post-structuralists cannot offer a general political theory which includes both a principle for political evaluation and a set of values which provide the foundation for critique, don't their theories lapse into an arbitrary decision, or worse, mere chaos? The assumption behind this question is that in order to engage in political philosophy adequately, one must first possess a set of values which are either generally accepted or can be defended by recourse to generally accepted values. Then, one must construct one's political philosophy using those values as foundations. Last, one should compare the present political situation with the constructed one in order to help understand the deficiencies of the present and possible routes to remedy those deficiencies.<sup>4</sup>

The challenge to post-structuralism is to offer an account of itself as a theoretical political practice. It is a challenge that cannot be answered within the terms of the two traditions that have defined the space of political theory in the twentieth century: liberalism and Marxism. Both these traditions have been rejected by the post-structuralists. However, there is a tradition, though not cited by the post-structuralists, within which their thought can be situated and thus better understood and evaluated. That tradition is the neglected "third way" of political theory: anarchism.

Anarchism is often dismissed in the same terms as post-structuralism for being an ethical relativism or a voluntarist chaos. However, the theoretical tradition of anarchism, though not as voluminous as Marxism or liberalism, provides a general framework within which post-structuralist thought can be situated, and thus more adequately evaluated. The remainder of this paper will take up the task of understanding post-structuralism as a contemporary form of anarchism. First, the traditional anarchist position will be discussed. Second, the post-structuralist critique of certain nineteenth century concepts underlying the anarchist narrative will be brought to bear. Third, an anarchism free from these concepts and more consonant with contemporary French political thought — a post-structuralist anarchism — will be sketched. In this sketch, it will be shown how such an anarchism avoids the problems that vitiate what might be called "foundationalis" political theorizing of the type described above.

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In the conflict between Marx and Bakunin that defined the First International, at issue were both the method and goals of organizing the proletariat against the bourgeoisie.<sup>5</sup> In Marx's view, it was necessary that there be a centralized leadership coordinating the struggle. Further, the goal of the struggle would be proletarian state ownership of the means of production. All this was incompatible, in Bakunin's eyes, with the aims of the workers and would lead unavoidably to a new repressive political structure. "Since there is to be political power there will inevitably be subjects, got up as citizens, true, in proper republican style, but subjects all the same, and

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Stephen Watson, "Jurgen Habermas and Jean-Francois Lyotard: Post Modernism and the Crisis of Rationality" in *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, Vol. 10#2, 1984, pp. 1-24.

<sup>4</sup> Of course, one need not proceed in this order. However, contemporary political philosophy — both Anglo-American and Continental — has been guided by the predominance of these three intertwined elements, with Rawls and Habermas providing perhaps the most enlightened examples.

<sup>5</sup> For an overview of the history of this conflict, see James Joll's *The Anarchists* (Boston, Little, Brown and Co.: 1965), pp. 79-96.

as such compelled to obey, for without obedience no power is possible.”<sup>6</sup> What Bakunin found onerous in Marx’s politics, both in its strategy and its goal, was the idea of representation as a political concept. Where there is representation, there is oppression. Anarchism can be defined as the struggle against representation in public life.

Representation, as a political concept, is the handing over of power by a group of people to another person or group of people ostensibly in order to have the interests of the former realized. Political representation differs from administrative representation, which involves no fundamental transfer of power but instead merely a delegation of administrative capability. In administrative representation, a group empowers an individual or another group to enact specific programs or specific means to a general goal; the representing group can be withdrawn or recalled at any time, and all final decisions lie with the represented group. By contrast, political representation involves a transfer of decision-making power from the represented to the representor.<sup>7</sup> The representing individual or group acts in the name of, and thus with the legitimation of, the represented group; its decisions cannot be overturned by the represented group.

Anarchist thought distrusts political representation because it sees the cession of power as the invitation to abuse. In this sense, it is not only state or economic power which is the object of its mistrust, but all forms of power exercised by one group over another. Within the anarchist tradition, the concept of politics and the political field is wider than it is within either Marxism or liberalism. For Bakunin, the two fundamental power arrangements to be struggled against (along with the capitalists) were, as his major work indicates, the state and the church.<sup>8</sup> To these, later anarchists have added plant managers, patriarchy and the institution of marriage, prisons, psychotherapy, and a myriad of other oppressions.<sup>9</sup> Thus, in all areas of an individual’s social life, anarchism promotes direct consensual decision-making rather than a delegation of authority.

Direct decision-making along the various registers of one’s social life leads to a more decentralized approach to political intervention than Marxism would allow. For the latter, although a variety of social ills may not, strictly speaking, be reducible to capitalist economic structure, it is capitalism that founds their possibility. In the end there is only one intervention that matters: the intervention to reappropriate surplus value through the seizure of the means of production and the capture of the state. Marxism, no matter how supportive of struggles against racism, sexism, etc. it has been, has always seen them as strategically subordinated to the struggle for economic socialism. That is why it lends itself to centralized forms of struggle and political representation, in short Leninism, as its strategic expression. As anarchists have pointed out, however, and as history has made evident, such means are not to be divorced from their ends. The dictatorship of the proletariat has turned out to be, above all, a dictatorship. “It has thus become obvious that a

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<sup>6</sup> Bakunin, Mikhail, *Selected Writings*, (London, Cape: 1973, ed. Arthur Lehning, tr. Steven Cox and Olive Stevens), p. 253.

<sup>7</sup> It can be argued that, since all administration involves decision-making, even administrative representation requires a transfer of power; thus the change from administrative to political representation is a matter of degree rather than one of kind. This is true; but it is only another way of saying that politics is not science. To delegate a minimal amount of decision-making power to an administrative body is not to surrender the fundamental decisions of one’s public life. To put the matter otherwise, anarchist decision-making may be a relative rather than an absolute goal, but as a goal it is distinct from either liberal democracy or the dictatorship of the proletariat.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *God and the State* (New York, Dover: 1970).

<sup>9</sup> For a contemporary account of some of the fronts of anarchist struggle, see *Reinventing Anarchy: What are Anarchists Thinking These Days?*, ed. Howard Ehrlich, Carol Ehrlich, David DeLeon and Glenda Morris (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul: 1979).

further advance in social life does not lie in the direction of a further concentration of power and regulative functions in the hands of a governing body, but in the direction of decentralization, both territorial and functional.”<sup>10</sup> Both territorial *and* functional. Both in strategy and as the goal. Real political change comes from below and from many points, not from above and from a center. “The anarchist alternative is that of fragmentation, fission rather than fusion, diversity rather than unity, a mass of societies rather than a mass society.”<sup>11</sup>

Anarchism, then, focuses upon the oppressed themselves rather than upon those who claim to speak for them. And it sees oppression not merely in one type of situation, but rather in a variety of irreducible situations. In order to understand oppression, one must describe the situation in which it is found; there is no such thing as a class that is *a priori* oppressed across all situations. Here anarchism exhibits a resistance not only to reducibility but to abstraction more generally. “By proclaiming our morality of equality, or anarchism, we refuse to assume a right which moralists have always taken upon themselves to claim, that of mutilating the individual in the name of some ideal.”<sup>12</sup> What anarchism resists are the many ways in which the individual becomes subordinated to something outside him or herself. Representation by a group or another individual is one form of that subordination. Representation of one’s humanity by means of an ideal is another. Whether it be “the good,” “the march of history,” or “the needs of society,” anarchism is suspicious of ideals that function to coerce individuals into subordinating themselves to a larger cause.

This does not mean, however, that anarchism is either individualist in the liberal sense or morally hedonistic. Liberal individualism has always claimed to value freedom over enforced equality, holding the latter to require unnecessary constraints upon the former. In the anarchist tradition, however, it makes no sense to talk about freedom without some notion of equality. “Freedom without equality means that the poor and weak are less free than the rich and strong, and equality without freedom means that we are all slaves together.”<sup>13</sup> Freedom is not juridical, it is material; it is defined not by how one is treated under the law but by the concrete choices one is capable of making in the situations in which one finds oneself. Although there is a tradition of individualist anarchism,<sup>14</sup> its thought runs counter to the anarchist analyses of concrete oppression occurring within a variety of concrete contexts. Anarchism is not, fundamentally, liberalism gone wild.

It is also not a form of amoralism. By refusing to submit to an ideal of “the good,” anarchism does not reject morality. Instead, it argues that by holding an ideal to which individuals must subordinate themselves, one in fact acts counter to the moral intuition of respect for others. The rejection of a moral ideal is made precisely on moral grounds. “The good” is merely another way to represent people to themselves by means of something external to them. Rather than relying upon their own moral intuitions and their capacity to reflect upon them in irreducible concrete situations, individuals are asked to submit to an ideal which claims to realize their highest nature but in fact disjoins them from their capacities for critical reflection and thoughtful action. If individuals are to be able to act morally, they must be allowed to consider the situations in which

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<sup>10</sup> Kropotkin, Peter, “Anarchist Communism” in *Kropotkin’s Revolutionary Pamphlets*, ed. Roger Baldwin (New York, Dover: 1970), p. 51.

<sup>11</sup> Ward, Colin, *Anarchy in Action*, op. cit., p. 52.

<sup>12</sup> Kropotkin, Peter, “Anarchist Morality” in *Kropotkin’s Revolutionary Pamphlets*, op. cit., p. 105.

<sup>13</sup> Walter, Nicolas, “About Anarchism,” in *Reinventing Anarchy*, op. cit., p. 43.

<sup>14</sup> Represented by such figures as Max Stirner and Benjamin Tucker.

they find themselves in their specificity and materiality, rather than submitting to an abstract formula which is imposed upon situations from above.

Here lies the *a priori* of traditional anarchism: trust in the individual. From its inception, anarchism has founded itself on a faith in the individual to realize his or her decision-making power morally and effectually.<sup>15</sup> The clearest contemporary statement of this trust comes from anarchist Murray Bookchin: “The revolutionary project must take its point of departure from a fundamental libertarian precept: every normal human being is competent to manage the affairs of society and, more specifically, the community in which he or she is a member.”<sup>16</sup> Left to their own devices, individuals have a natural ability — indeed a propensity — to devise social arrangements that are both just and efficient. It is only in situations of inequality, situations in which some individuals are permitted to have power over others, that individual capabilities are deformed and become directed toward oppression rather than mutual respect and creativity. “It is the characteristic of privilege and every privileged position to kill the mind and heart of men.”<sup>17</sup>

In this sense, the distinctive feature shared by all institutions that oppress — political, economic, religious, patriarchal, or other — is the repression of individual potential. Although oppression occurs on a variety of fronts and in a multitude of ways, all of its variegations share the trait of restricting action, of limiting individual choice. It is, of course, a parody of anarchism to claim that it promotes a chaos of hedonism to subvert the monolith of state power; but it is here, in the complementary notions of individual competence and oppression as repression, that such a claim takes root.

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There are, on the surface, several similarities between traditional anarchist thought and post-structuralist theory. The critique of representation is a central theme of the post-structuralists; Deleuze once told Foucault “you were the first...to teach us something absolutely fundamental: the indignity of speaking for others.”<sup>18</sup> Decentralization, local action, discovering power in its various networks rather than in the state alone, are hallmark traits of post-structuralist analyses. However, if post-structuralist political thought were to be characterized by a single feature, it would be the critique of autonomy involved in the theory of the subject. Foucault’s histories of the constitution of the subject, Deleuze and Guattari’s encrustation of the social into the interstices of the personal, and Lyotard’s analyses of the pragmatic aspects of language that are determinative forthought were produced, in part, to denigrate the concept of the subject as an autonomous, self-transparent, self-sustaining entity. The *a priori* of traditional anarchism is anathema to post-structuralism.

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<sup>15</sup> Kropotkin’s *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (London, Heinemann: 1902) is a reply to Darwin’s thesis of natural selection, arguing that there is among all animals a cooperative spirit dedicated to furthering the race that exists alongside the competitive spirit. “Sociability and need of mutual aid and support are such inherent parts of human nature that at no time of history can we discover men living in small isolated families, fighting each other for the means of subsistence” p. 118.

<sup>16</sup> Bookchin, Murray, *Remaking Society* (Montreal and New York, Black Rose Books: 1989), p.174.

<sup>17</sup> Bakunin, *God and the State*, op. cit., p. 31.

<sup>18</sup> “Intellectuals and Power,” in Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, -tr. Donald Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, Cornell University Press: 1077), p. 209.

It would seem, then, that the similarities between anarchism and post-structuralism end at the surface. For what would anarchism be without individual autonomy? It is autonomy that founds the possibility of action from below, that resists the reduction to representation, and that constitutes the moral dignity that abstraction and representation offend. Without a trust in the individual it makes no sense to accuse institutional powers of repressing the individual; without a subject recognizably distinct from the social sphere, it makes no sense to talk of autonomy at all. Traditional anarchism is founded on the conception of the individual as possessing a reserve that is irreducible to social arrangements of power; to remove it, or to dilute it in a network of social practices, effectively precludes the possibility of resistance.

Yet it is precisely the denial of a reserve within subjectivity forming the locus of resistance that the post-structuralists assert. Foucault and Lyotard are clear on this. Foucault: "All my analyses are against the idea of universal necessities in human existence."<sup>19</sup> Lyotard (in a review of Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*): "Looking for the creditor [the one from whom surplus value is stolen and who will revolt for its repayment] is wasted effort, the *subject* of the credit would always have to be *made to exist*, the proletariat to be incarnated on the surface of the socius."<sup>20</sup> Deleuze is the closest to traditional anarchism; his claim that "[t]here is only desire and the social, and nothing else"<sup>21</sup> appears to lend itself to an interpretation of individual autonomy opposing social repression. But, for Deleuze, desire is not autonomy: it is anonymous energy that has revolutionary potential only because it is an excess over the constraints which, in connivance with the social, it also *creates and sustains*. "To the question 'How can desire desire its own repression, how can it desire its slavery?' we reply that the powers which crush desire, or which subjugate it, themselves already form part of the assemblages of desire."<sup>22</sup>

Why does post-structuralist political theory reject the concept of individual autonomy, which forms the cornerstone of traditional anarchist theory? Foucault, Deleuze, and Lyotard seek social change no less than the anarchists. But if they do not rely upon a reserve within the subject to constitute the wellspring of change, where will they find it? Certainly not in an external representative they are unanimous in rejecting. The abandonment of the autonomous individual or subject as the locus of resistance, and for it the substitution of "something else," constitutes the decisive passage from a concept of resistance rooted in nineteenth century thought to more current conceptions. It parallels changes that have occurred in other areas in philosophy, as theorizing rooted in the subject has given way to the "linguistic turn" and, more recently, a "social turn."<sup>23</sup>

The reasons for jettisoning the subject as the locus of resistance are both historical and conceptual. Historically, the revolution predicted by Marx has not, in the West at least, come to pass. This failure is in part due to the fact that the working classes of the industrially developed

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<sup>19</sup> "Truth, Power, Self: An Interview," in *Technologies of the Self*, ed. Luther Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick Hutton (Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press: 1988), p. 11. See Foucault's "Afterword" in Dreyfus and Rabinow's *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press: 1982): "My objective...has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects" p. 208.

<sup>20</sup> "Energumen Capitalism," tr. James Leigh, in *Semiotext(e)*, "Anti-Oedipus," Vol. 2, #3, 1977, p. 17.

<sup>21</sup> Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix, *Anti-Oedipus* (New York, Viking: 1977), p. 29.

<sup>22</sup> Deleuze, Gilles and Parnet, Claire, *Dialogues* (New York, Columbia: 1987, tr. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam), p. 133.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. ex., Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, Princeton University Press: 1979), the most seminal of the works emphasizing the importance of the social in epistemology.

nations have not, as Marx thought they would, become increasingly immiserated. However, part of the reason for the failure of the revolutionary prediction has also been ascribed to the ability of capitalism to manipulate subjectivity.<sup>24</sup> The Frankfurt School, for instance, had sought to explain the absence of revolution by recourse to the cultural system's ability to absorb all resistance, and with it all subjectivity. In the events of May, 1968 in France, students claimed that contemporary capitalism created a spectacle in which everyone was maneuvered into participating. In short, the reserve of individual autonomy had been absorbed into the systems of oppression, and thus was unsuited to form the basis for radical change.

The questioning of individual autonomy, however, is more than a historical matter. Twentieth century philosophy has come to understand the subject to be suffused by forces once considered external to it. The structure of knowledge has been found to be tied to the structure of language and to social and cultural practices of justification; it is not a given of the species. Behavior is thought to be more deeply rooted in surrounding milieux (whether they are societal reinforcements or the unconscious family theater) than was previously considered. To these changes post-structuralism has added a critique of humanism that precludes a return to the subject as the hope of resistance.

The post-structuralist critique of humanism is founded on two intertwined tenets: first, that the subject as such is constituted in exteriority, and second, that power does not repress but rather creates. In Foucault, the critique cuts across both historical and conceptual dimensions. Particularly in his laterwork, he concerns himself with the question of how the subject is constituted within networks of knowledge that are also networks of power (a schism that Foucault calls "power/knowledge"). *Discipline and Punish*, "a correlative history of the modern soul and of a new power to judge,"<sup>25</sup> demonstrates how the discourse of knowledge about the modern psyche is also a practice of power such that what has been read as a journey of scientific discovery can as easily be read as an increasingly subtle display of disciplinary technique. In this nexus of science and discipline, the subject as such is being constituted. An autonomy is ascribed to the subject, a realm of individual character that offers itself to prison wardens, psychologists, social workers, educators, and others as material to be shaped into socially acceptable patterns. Subjectivity and "normalization" become corresponding terms with a relationship of direct implication; the wholeness of each depends upon adequacy of the other. The first volumes of Foucault's *History of Sexuality* broaden these themes, using as their point of reference "that interplay between truth and sex' which was bequeathed to us by the nineteenth century."<sup>26</sup> His studies offer historical reasons that are simultaneously political and conceptual for rejecting the view of subjectivity as a proper cite for situating resistance to the current order.

Deleuze focuses more on the energetic than on the historical.<sup>27</sup> Like the anarchists, and more than Foucault, he is concerned with finding a space of resistance. But like Foucault, he rejects the concept of subjectivity, seeing it as constituted rather than constituting. His analysis of this constitution takes the form, in the two-volume *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, of showing

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. ex., Horkheimer, Max and Adorno, Theodor, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York, Seabury Press: 1972, tr. John Cumming).

<sup>25</sup> *Discipline and Punish* (New York, Random House: 1977, tr. Alan Sheridan), p. 23.

<sup>26</sup> *History of Sexuality: Volume 1, An Introduction* (New York, Random House: 1980, tr. Robert Hurley), p. 57.

<sup>27</sup> Though we only address *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* here, Deleuze's concern with energetics goes back as far as his second book, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (New York, Columbia University Press: 1983), where he follows Nietzsche's analysis of subjectivity in its constitution by active and reactive forces.

how desire, a productive energetic stratum that is “*part of the infrastructure*,”<sup>28</sup> can become self-oppressive in its appropriation by the social field within which it exists. Under capitalism, the central mechanism of the oppression of desire is the constitution of the subject through the Oedipus complex. The operation of Oedipus is, for Deleuze and Guattari, historical rather than anthropological; its result, the modern subject, is a contributor to the social order rather than a form of resistance to it. To discover the possibility of revolution is to abandon the subject and to seek alternative routes, which Deleuze calls “lines of escape,”<sup>29</sup> in which to channel desire. Thus Deleuze’s critique of humanism parallels Foucault’s, and denies the subject the dignity of its autonomy through an analysis of the mechanisms by which it becomes constituted to be a subject.

During most of the 1970s, Lyotard shared Deleuze’s concern with energies, objecting only that Oedipus was an irrelevant part of the analysis and that capitalism had its own energetic mechanism of self-destruction.<sup>30</sup> For him, the subject was not so much dangerous as negligible; humanism was more irrelevant than insidious. In more recent works, Lyotard moves away from energies to a concern with language; the subject, however, remains unaddressed. What *The Differend* analyzes are the pragmatics of discourse that enable some discourses to achieve hegemony while others are reduced to silence. The concern here is with justice, which in his earlier book, *Just Gaming*, had emerged as a preoccupation for Lyotard because he was seeking, in the wake of the demise of metanarratives, the concept (following Aristotle) of “justice without models.”<sup>31</sup> *The Differend* studies the political pragmatics of language, and argues that linguistic discourse always appears in the form of a genre, with its own rules of style, evidence, and succession. In his most urgent example, he takes up the denial by Robert Faurisson that the holocaust ever occurred. Faurisson argues that since no one can describe the operation of the gas chambers from first-hand experience, there is no evidence for their having actually operated or killed anyone. This type of argument Lyotard calls a “differend,” “the case where the plaintiff is divested of the means to argue and becomes for that reason a victim.”<sup>32</sup>

For Lyotard, the dominance of certain genres of language creates victims by denying the expression proper to other genres. The dominance of the scientific genre is one of those victimizing genres, whose rules of evidence Faurisson uses (or better, warps) to deny the claims of Jews upon history. The underlying argument of Lyotard’s concern with the pragmatics of discourse is that there must be space created for a proliferation of different (and even new types of) genres, if the incommensurability that attaches to different genres is not to result in the victimization of speakers. In this concern, Lyotard focuses not upon the autonomy of a subject — a focus which would merely substitute another dominant genre — but upon discourse itself, the possibilities and dangers presented by the necessity of events of spoken discourse. Genres of discourse create worlds; at the same time, the dominance of some genres threatens to cast the worlds of some into obscurity, and ultimately into non-existence.

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<sup>28</sup> *Anti-Oedipus*, op. cit., p. 104.

<sup>29</sup> Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press: 1987, tr. Brian Massumi), p. 3 *et passim*.

<sup>30</sup> Cf., *Economie Libidinale* (Paris, Editions de Minuit:1974), esp. pp. 9–26 for a full account of Lyotard’s energies and “Energumen Capitalism,” op. cit., pp. 21–26 for his critique of Deleuze and Guattari’s handling of Oedipus.

<sup>31</sup> Lyotard, Jean-Francois and Thebaud, Jean-Loup, *Just Gaming* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press: 1985, tr. Wlad Godzich), p. 26.

<sup>32</sup> *The Differend* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press: 1988, tr. George Van Den Abbeele), p. 9.



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The post-structuralist analyses of the knowledge, of desire, and of language, subvert the humanist discourse which is the foundation of traditional anarchism. Moreover, they consider humanism's emphasis on the autonomy and dignity of the subject to be dangerous (except for Lyotard, for whom it is mostly irrelevant), continuing in a subtler guise the very mechanisms of oppression it sought to resist. Humanism is the nineteenth century motif, and individual autonomy and subjectivity its concepts, that must be rejected if a politics adequate to our age is to be articulated. This motif and its concepts are not peculiar to anarchism; they provide the foundation both for liberalism, with its emphasis on freedom and autonomy, and for traditional Marxism, with its focus on labor as a species-being, as well. (It is no accident that recent Marxists such as Althusser have tried to re-formulate Marxism by divesting it of all humanist categories.) Humanism is the foundation of all political theory bequeathed to us by the nineteenth century. In rejecting it, post-structuralism has questioned not only the fundamental assumptions of such theory, but also the very idea that political theory actually requires foundations. That is why post-structuralism is so often misunderstood as an extreme relativism or nihilism.

However, it is not in favor of chaos that post-structuralism has abjured the notion of foundations, humanist or otherwise, for its political theorizing. What it has offered instead are precise analyses of oppression in its operation on a variety of registers. None of the post-structuralists claims to offer unsurpassable perspectives on oppression; indeed their analyses raise doubts about the coherence of the concept of an unsurpassable perspective in political theory. Instead, they engage in what has often been called "micropolitics": political theorizing that is specific to regions, types, or levels of political activity, but makes no pretensions of offering a general political theory. To offer a general political theory would in fact run counter to their common contention that oppression must be analyzed and resisted on the many registers and in the many nexes in which it is discovered. It would be to invite a return to the problem created by humanism, which became a tool of oppression to the very degree that it became a conceptual foundation for political or social thought. For the post-structuralists, there is a Stalin waiting behind every general political theory: either you conform to the concepts on which it relies, or else you must be changed or eliminated in favor of those concepts. Foundationalism in political theory is, in short, inseparable from representation.

This is the trap of an anarchist humanism. By relying on humanism as its conceptual basis, anarchists precluded the possibility of resistance by those who do not conform to its dictates of normal subjectivity. Thus it is no surprise when in Kropotkin's critique of the prisons he lauds Pinel as a liberator of the insane, failing to see the new psychological bonds Pinel introduced and which Foucault analysed in *Histoire de la Folie*.<sup>33</sup> For traditional anarchism, abnormality is to be cured rather than expressed; and though far more tolerant of deviance from the norm in matters of sexuality and other behaviors, there remains in such an anarchism the concept of the norm as the prototype of the properly human. This prototype, the post-structuralists have argued, does not constitute the source of resistance against oppression in the contemporary age; rather, through its unity and its concrete operation it is one form of such oppression.

Traditional anarchism, in its foundational concepts — and moreover, in the fact of possessing foundational concepts — betrays the insights which constitute its core. Humanism is a form

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. Kropotkin's "Prisons and Their Moral Influence on Prisoners" in *Kropotkin's Revolutionary Pamphlets*, op. cit., esp. p. 234; and Foucault's *Histoire de la Folie à L'age Classique* (Paris, Gallimard: 1972), pp. 511–530.

of representation; thus, anarchism, as a critique of representation, cannot be constructed on its basis. Post-structuralist theorizing has, in effect, offered a way out of the humanist trap by engaging in non-foundationalist political critique. Such critique reveals how decentralized, non-representative radical theorizing can be articulated without relying upon a fundamental concept or motif in the name of which it offers its critique. However, one question remains which, unanswered, threatens the very notion of post-structuralism as a political *critique*. If it is not in the name of humanism or some other foundation that the critique occurs, in what or whose name is it a critique? How can the post-structuralists criticize existing social structures as oppressive without either a concept of what is being oppressed or at least a set of values that would be better realized in another social arrangement? In eliminating autonomy as inadequate to play the role of the oppressed in political critique, has post-structuralism eliminated the role itself, and with it the very possibility of critique? In short, can there be critique without representation?

To the last question, the answer must be: in some sense yes, and in some sense no. There can be no political critique without a value in the name of which one criticizes. One practice or institution must be said in some way to be wrong relative to another. Simply put, evaluation cannot occur without values; and where there are values, there is representation. For instance, in his history of the prisons, Foucault criticizes the practices of psychology and penology for normalizing individuals. His criticism rests on a value that goes something like this: one should not constrain others' action or thought unnecessarily. Lyotard can be read as promoting the value, among others, of allowing the fullest expression for different linguistic genres. Inasmuch as these values are held to be valid for all, there is representation underlying post-structuralist theorizing.

However, these values are not pernicious to the anarchist project of allowing oppressed populations to decide their goals and their means of resistance within the registers of their own oppression. They do not reduce struggles in one area to struggles in another. They are consonant with decentralized resistance and with local self-determination. The values that infuse the works of Foucault, Deleuze, and Lyotard are directed not toward formulating the means and ends of the oppressed considered as a single class; they try to facilitate the struggles of different groups by offering analyses, conceptual strategies, and political and theoretical critique. Foucault observes that “[t]he intellectual no longer has to play the role of an advisor. The project, tactics and goals to be adopted are a matter for those who do the fighting. What the intellectual can do is to provide instruments of analysis.”<sup>34</sup> Post-structuralism leaves the decision of how the oppressed are to determine themselves to the oppressed; it merely provides them with intellectual tools that they may find helpful along the way.

And to those who say that even the minimal values of the post-structuralists are too much, who refuse to be represented as people who think others should not be constrained unnecessarily, or would like to allow others their expression, the post-structuralists have nothing to offer in the way of refutation. To seek a general theory (outside any logical conflict or inconsistency between specific values) within which to place such values is to engage once again in the project of building foundations, and thus of representation. Beyond the point of local values that allow for resistance along a variety of registers, there is no longer theory — only combat.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977* (New York, Pantheon: 1980, tr. C. Gordon, L. Marshall, J. Mepham, and K. Soper), p. 62.

<sup>35</sup> It should be noted that it is not only politically unappealing but theoretically impossible as well to seek to found a set of values in order to refute a value held by another. Hitler's central value — roughly that Jews were the

Thus post-structuralist theory is indeed anarchist. It is in fact more consistently anarchist than traditional anarchist theory has proven to be. The theoretical wellspring of anarchism — the refusal of representation by political or conceptual means in order to achieve self-determination along a variety of registers and at different local levels — finds its underpinnings articulated most accurately by the post-structuralist political theorists. Conversely, post-structuralism, rather than comprising a jumble of unrelated analyses, can be seen within the broad movement of anarchism. Reiner Schurmann was correct to call the locus of resistance in Foucault an “anarchist subject” who struggles against “the law of social totalization.”<sup>36</sup> The same could be said for Deleuze and Lyotard. The type of intellectual activity promoted by the traditional anarchists and exemplified by the post-structuralists is one of specific analysis rather than of overarching critique. The traditional anarchists pointed to the dangers of the dominance of abstraction; the post-structuralists have taken account of those dangers in all of their works. They have produced a theoretical corpus that addresses itself to an age that has seen too much of political representation and too little of self-determination. What both traditional anarchism and contemporary post-structuralism seek is a society — or better, a set of intersecting societies — in which people are not told who they are, what they want, and how they shall live, but who will be able to determine these things for themselves. These societies constitute an ideal and, as the post-structuralists recognize, probably an impossible ideal. But in the kinds of analyses and struggles such an ideal promotes — analyses and struggles dedicated to opening up concrete spaces of freedom in the social field — lay the value of anarchist theory, both traditional and contemporary.

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cause of all European trouble and must be eliminated — could not be refuted if he could make all of his other values logically consistent with it, which is certainly possible in principle.

<sup>36</sup> “On Constituting Oneself an Anarchist Subject” in *Praxis International*, Vol. 6, #13, 1986, p. 307.

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Todd May  
Is Post-Structuralist Political Theory Anarchist?  
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This text would later become the foundation for May's book, *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism*.

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