

Post-Anarchism on the State—An Anarchist Critique

Response to Saul Newman, "Anarchism, Marxism, and the Bonapartist State"

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Contents

Anarchism and Marxism on the Class Theory of the State	3
Newman’s attack on the class theory of the state is not only an attack on Marxism but also on the traditional mainstream anarchist view	4
Bonapartism	5
Political Implications	6
No Working Class Revolution	8
“The Global Capitalist State Order”	9
Conclusion: The State Serves the Class Enemy	10
References	10

A key question for any political theory is its conception of the state. This includes the view of the state by the trend calling itself “post-anarchism.” This name does not refer to being “after” or “beyond” anarchism. Mainly it refers to attempted integrations of anarchism with the philosophical views of post-structuralism and postmodernism, as developed by certain French philosophers (May 1994; Russell & Evren 2011). According to Ruth Kinna, “*Anarchism’s third, post-anarchist, wave [is] usually dated to the rise of the alter-globalization movement in the late 1990s...*” (Kinna 2017; 25) It was not so much a change in organizing strategies as a new theoretical approach. “Post-anarchism is not only one of the most significant currents to emerge within contemporary anarchist thought in recent years, it also has ‘evident affinities’ with small-a anarchist movement politics.” (36) In this paper, I am looking at the post-anarchists’ political thinking and not on their background philosophies (in philosophy, I prefer a radicalized version of John Dewey’s pragmatism; Price 2014).

One of the most prominent post-anarchist theorists is **Saul Newman**. He has written a number of important books and essays on the subject. One essay (Newman 2004) concentrates on the nature of the state. It directly confronts the class theory of the state (also called the “materialist” or “historical materialist” theory of the state). This is a subject on which I have recently written (Price 2018). His is different from many other post-anarchist writings which emphasize that the state is not the only source of power, but that power is created in many places. “*Foucault argues that the state is a kind of discursive illusion that masks the radically dispersed nature of power...*” (Newman 2004; 23) Newman does not quite agree with this. He takes the state seriously. Whether or not a network of power is a useful model of society, the state still exists and needs to be analyzed. For this reason, I think it would be useful to examine this particular post-anarchist work.

In his essay, Newman never actually defines what he means by the state. I have found the same to be true in other post-anarchist writings. Let me then **define the state as a bureaucratic-military social machine, composed of specialized officials, bureaucrats, and armed people, separate from and standing over the mass of people**. This is a different matter than just any possible social system of coordination, policy deciding, dispute settling, or even defense from anti-social aggression. All these things existed for thousands of years among humans before the state arose and will exist after it is abolished. It is the state as an elite socially-alienated bureaucratic-military institution which is connected to the capitalist system and all other systems of oppression.

Anarchism and Marxism on the Class Theory of the State

It would be easy to contrast anarchism with Marxist-Leninism, that is, with the recent and current Stalinist states of the USSR, Maoist China, North Korea, etc. These states were founded by people calling themselves “Marxist” and supposed champions of the “working class.” Yet they were state-capitalist, mass-murdering, totalitarianisms. But Karl Marx, a radical democrat, would have been as horrified by such states as are anarchists. The issue is to show what there was about Marxism which led to such results, despite Marx’s intentions. Consistent with that focus, Newman directs himself primarily to Marx’s views, with little to say about post-Marx Marxism (just a few comments on Lenin).

Still, the paper presents itself as a dispute between anarchism and Marxism. In part, this binary is modified by some indications that anarchists have found aspects of Marxism useful. “*For anarchists, Marxism has great value as an analysis of capitalism and the relations [of] private property which it is tied to.*” (19) “*Bakunin perhaps represents the most radical elements of Marxist theory.*” (17) (10) Newman himself repeatedly expresses appreciation of the “post-Marxism” of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, whose work comes out of the Marxist tradition.

However, the main problem with Newman’s anarchism-versus-Marxism approach is that the traditional anarchist movement also had a class theory of the state. Peter Kropotkin, the great theorist of anarchism, wrote, “*The State has always interfered in the economic life in favor of the capitalist exploiter. It has always granted him protection in robbery, given aid and support for further enrichment. And it could not be otherwise. To do so was one of the functions—the chief mission—of the State.*” (Kropotkin 2014; 193) In Kinna’s view, Kropotkin thought “*political institutions reflected the nature of economic power, which was fundamental...The state was designed to protect the strong against the weak, the rich against the poor, and the privileged against the laboring classes...Bourgeois government [was] a special vehicle for the protection of commercial and industrial class interests.*” (Kinna 2017; 86–88) “*Bakunin had advanced the same argument, crediting Marx with its most sophisticated scientific articulation.*” (86)

Newman’s attack on the class theory of the state is not only an attack on Marxism but also on the traditional mainstream anarchist view

Newman seeks to deny this. For example, he cites Bakunin’s support for the class theory of the state but then tries to turn it on its head. “*Bakunin...takes Marx seriously when he says that the state is always concomitant with class distinctions and domination. However there is an important difference...For Marx the dominant class generally rules through the state, whereas for Bakunin the state generally rules through the dominant class...Bourgeois relations are actually a reflection of the state, rather than the state being a reflection of bourgeois relations.*” (Newman 2004;17)

This acknowledges that Bakunin, the principal initiator of the movement for revolutionary anarchism, believed that “*the state is always concomitant with class distinctions and domination.*” That is different from seeing the state as distinct and autonomous from the class structure. Actually, Bakunin saw the state as interacting with the economy, in a back-and-forth, dialectical, manner. The modern state causes capitalism and capitalism causes the modern state.

This is similar to Marx’s concept of “primitive (primary) accumulation,” in which the state played a key role in initiating capitalism. The state expropriated the British peasants from their land, conquered and looted foreign countries, supported slavery, and defended theft from the environment. These actions accumulated capital on one side and propertyless workers on the other, the essentials for capitalism. In *Capital*, Marx wrote of “*the power of the state, the concentrated and organized force of society, to hasten, hothouse fashion, the process of transformation of the feudal mode of production into the capitalist mode...Force is...itself an economic power.*” (Marx 1906; 823-4) Kropotkin criticized this “primitive accumulation” only because it may imply that this is a passing phase, understating the continuing influence of the state in maintaining capital-

ism. Recognizing that “*Force is itself an economic power*” is not a rejection of the class theory of the state.

Newman presents two alternate views: “*the state represented the interests of the most economically dominant class—the bourgeoisie.*” (Newman 2004; 6) This is ascribed to Marx. Or: “*Anarchism sees the state as an autonomous institution—or series of institutions—that has its own interests and logic.*” (9) “*It is independent of economic forces and has its own imperative of self-perpetuation....Anarchism sees the state, in its essence, as independent of economic classes....*” (14) This last view is his opinion, that of post-anarchism, but not that of the “classical” anarchists.

Bonapartism

Newman points out that Marx developed his concept of the state further. This was expressed in his analysis of the French dictatorship of Louis Napoleon III in his 1852 *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (Marx 2002). He developed a concept of “Bonapartism,” which was also expressed in Engels’ and his writings on Bismarck in Germany and on other historical states (Draper 1977). They noted that the state balanced among various class forces. Even within the upper class there were fractions of classes and agents of fractions of classes, which put conflicting pressures on the state. They saw that the state had its own interests as an institution and so did its bureaucratic, political, and military personnel. Sometimes the bourgeoisie had mostly direct control of the state, as under parliamentary democracy. At other times, they were shut out, as under Louis Bonaparte’s “Empire” or under Nazi totalitarianism. But even without democratic rights, the bourgeoisie continued to exploit their employees and accumulate profits. This “right” was still defended by the dictatorial state! “*According to Marx...the Bonapartist state served the long term interests of the capitalist system, even if it often acted against the immediate interests and will of the bourgeoisie.*” (Newman 2004; 7)

There is a tendency for the state—especially its executive branch—to develop increased independence relative to the rest of society, even under bourgeois democracy, but which reaches its height under political dictatorship. In Newman’s terms, cited above, it may be acknowledged that “*the state has its own interests and logic...and has its own imperative of self-preservation.*” But it is **not** true that the state is “*independent of class forces.*” Rather it balances among them and still maintains the overall interests of the bourgeoisie. This has been referred to as the state’s “*relative autonomy.*” (5)

Newman claims that anarchists (or at least post-anarchists) took the concept of Bonapartism to its rightful extreme. “*Anarchism took Marx’s notion of the Bonapartist State to its logical conclusion, thus developing a theory of state power and sovereignty as an entirely autonomous and specific domain....*” (38–39)

Does this make sense? Does not the state, as an institution with a drive for “*self-preservation,*” have an absolute need to keep the economy going? Under capitalism this means the continued accumulation of capital; it means the exploitation of the working class to produce ever increased amounts of profit. Without this, there is no state, no society, and none of the other oppressions of race, gender, etc. Can there be “*an entirely autonomous*” state, unrelated to economic oppression? Neither Bakunin nor Kropotkin believed that. I quoted Kropotkin above as believing that protecting capitalist exploiters “*was one] of the functions—the chief mission—of the State.*” Not the **only** function or mission, but **one** of the functions” and “the **chief** mission.”

If we look at the state as a “*specific domain*,” then it has a great many social forces, economic and otherwise, class and non-class, pushing on it. (Non-class forces include racial tensions, gender conflicts, not to mention organized religion.) Yet these forces are of differing strength and impact. The class theory “*involves a claim that the capitalist class is able to wield more potent power resources over against pressure from below and the capacity for independent action on the part of the state itself....The political sway of the capitalist class [is] not **exclusive** but **predominant**.*” (Wetherly 2002; 197) Even the most autonomous of totalitarian fascist states still must take into account the needs of its capitalist class—or it will not survive. Even the bureaucratic Stalinist states of the Soviet Union, Maoist China, etc.—which had entirely disposed of their stock-owning bourgeoisie—still had to maintain the exploitation of the workers and the accumulation of capital: the capital-labor relationship.

Summarizing the most mature and sophisticated views of Marx (and traditional anarchists)—with which he disagrees—Newman writes, “*Rather than saying that, for Marx, the state is the **instrument** of [the] bourgeoisie, it may be more accurate to say that the state is a **reflection** of bourgeois class domination, a institution whose structure is determined by capitalist relations. Its function is to maintain an economic and social order that allows the bourgeoisie to continue to exploit the proletariat.*” (11) Or, for the Stalinist states, for **someone** “to continue to exploit the proletariat”—in this case, the collective bureaucratic class (until it collapsed back into traditional capitalism).

I think that this makes more sense than either a view of the state as a passive puppet of the bourgeoisie (should anyone hold such a crude theory) or as “*entirely autonomous*” and “*independent of class forces*.”

Political Implications

Political analyses have no meaning unless they lead to differences in strategy or tactics. “*A difference which makes no difference is no difference*,” as the saying goes. Newman contrasts the differing potential “*revolutionary strategies*” that go with the alternatives of the “*neutral*” or “*autonomous state*” or the (class) “*determined state*.” He discusses which (theorized) state should be seen as the “*tool of revolution*” and which as something “*to be destroyed in revolution*.” (8) Rather than summarize his discussion, I will go through the issue as I see it.

(1) The idea that **the state was integrally tied to the capitalist class and could not be otherwise**, led to the revolutionary belief that this state had to be overturned, smashed, dismantled, and replaced by alternate institutions. In a new preface to the *Communist Manifesto*, Engels quoted Marx, “*One thing especially was proved by the [Paris] Commune, viz., that ‘the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery and wield it for its own purposes’.*” (Marx & Engels 1955; 6) This did not deny the value of fighting for reforms, but the ultimate goal was a state-destroying revolution.

But two different conclusions were drawn. One was that the working class, when overturning the capitalists’ state, also needed its own class state, a “workers’ state,” the “revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat”—if only for a while, until a fully classless society could be instituted. This could be interpreted as an ultra-democratic state, similar to the Paris Commune or the early soviets, which would “immediately” start to “wither away” —which is how Lenin presented it at the beginning of the Russian revolution. Or, alternately, as the justification for an increas-

ingly authoritarian, one-party, police state, which is what Lenin developed over time. This soon evolved into Stalin's state-capitalist totalitarianism.

On the other hand, anarchists argued that the state, by its very structure (as I defined it above), was an instrument of the capitalist class, or of some other exploiting class. Throughout history, ruling minorities needed a state to maintain their rule over the big majority; a self-managing majority would not need it. If a new state were to be created after a revolution, it would only put a bureaucratic class in power, ruling over a state capitalist economy. (As we know, these warnings came true.) Instead, anarchists argued for networks and federations of workplace councils, neighborhood assemblies, and voluntary associations. The workers and all the oppressed needed to replace all states with the self-organization of the emancipated people.

(2) The alternate theory of **a neutral and wholly autonomous state** was (and is) championed by reformists, liberals, and social democrats. The state, they claimed, was a machine which could be used by anyone, capitalists or workers, white supremacists or People of Color, oppressors or oppressed. Therefore radicals should fight to take over the existing state and use it to do good. (This is the view of Laclau and Mouffe, the "post-Marxists" whom Newman admires.)

But post-anarchists argue that the state has its own drives for oppression, regardless of the class system it is associated with at any time. To use it to get rid of one system of exploitation would only leave the field open for the state's own oppressive dynamics. It would only replace capitalism with some other method of exploitation, such as the rule of a bureaucratic class. Therefore the state must not be used to make a revolution nor to solidify a new society after one.

Those who identify with the revolutionary anarchist tradition do not really disagree with the last argument. The state has authoritarian and oppressive tendencies which make it unusable for a genuinely popular, democratic, revolution-from-below. However, I do not separate these tendencies from the state's essential attachment to the rule of a minority exploiting class. These are not distinct dynamics.

Which leads to a response to the question of why Marx's Marxism led to Stalinist totalitarianism, despite Marx's own democratic-libertarian tendencies. At least one part of it was his program of replacing the bourgeois state with a new state of the working class and its allies, if only for a time. This transitional state was supposed to expropriate the capitalists and centralize all their property into its own hands. No matter how democratic, popular, and temporary in conception, the use of a socially alienated bureaucratic-military state machine was bound to lead to a new form of exploitation and oppression. This was argued by Bakunin, Kropotkin, and other revolutionary class-struggle anarchist-socialists at the time of Marx and immediately after, and has repeatedly been proven true, alas.

Whether Saul Newman is for revolution cannot be told from this essay (it may be clearer in other works). Most of the other post-anarchists, like the "new" or "small-a" anarchists, advocate building alternate institutions, small scale actions, and different lifestyles, without focusing on an ultimate goal of direct popular attack against the capitalist class or the state. (Price 2016) The post-anarchists usually justify this by arguing that the state is not the only source of power in society, but merely one among many. Therefore anarchists do not need to focus on the state as the main enemy. It can be worked around, chipped away, or just ignored. The capitalist class is seen as a disjointed, pluralistic, entity, with society overall best understood as a network of forces without a center. All of which leads to a rejection of overturning the state as a main goal. In fact "revolution" is usually regarded as the fantasy of a single (bloody) upheaval which would immediately change society—which is rejected as the nonsense it is (and is not a model held

by serious revolutionaries). However, revolutionary anarchists regard as a dangerous fantasy the idea that the capitalist class and its state would permit a peaceful, gradual, transformation of society—in which they would lose their wealth and power—without attempting to crush the people (through savage repression, fascism, civil war, etc.).

No Working Class Revolution

Whether Newman is against revolution, he is against working class revolution, because he is against a focus on the working class. He would deny that the “proletariat” is the necessary (but not sufficient) agent to transform society, or even that it is one of the three to five most important potential forces.

Newman repeatedly merges the idea of the working class with the idea of the Leninist vanguard party, objecting “*to the central role of the proletariat—or, to be more precise, to the vanguard role of the Party.*” (37) But revolutionary anarchists who looked to the working class did not advocate such authoritarian, elitist, parties. Among Marxists, Rosa Luxemburg rejected Lenin’s concept of the vanguard party, and there is a long history of libertarian-autonomist Marxists who orient to the aspects of Marx’s work which are radically democratic, humanistic (anti-alienation), proletarian (anti-bureaucratic), and scientific (anti-scientistic). This trend, neither social democratic nor Marxist-Leninist, does not share a concept of the elitist vanguard party. It has raised libertarian socialist politics which can be in dialogue with revolutionary anarchism (Prichard et al 2017).

The post-anarchists have been criticized for their negative approach to class concerns and how they deal with them. An “*emerging critique is that the post-anarchists have given up on the notion of ‘class’ and have retreated into obscure and intoxicating academic diatribes against a tradition built of discursive straw.*” (Rousselle, in the Preface to Rousselle & Evren 2011; vii) Indeed, Newman’s rejection of a working class orientation is sometimes on a rather high plane of abstract post-structuralist philosophizing. He denounces “*the perspective of a universal epistemological position—such as that of the proletariat....*” (37)

At other times, Newman raises empirical problems, which I think are the real issue. He refers to “*...the empirical reality of the shrinking of the working class...*” (32) and to the “*concrete social conditions of the shrinking working class in post-industrial societies...*” (29)

It is true that there are fewer industrial workers in the U.S. (although still a big minority), but the population is overwhelming working class. That is, most adults are employed by capital or the state, producing goods or services for pay, without supervising others. Blue collar, white collar, pink collar, in construction or slaughterhouses, cleaning houses for others or waiting tables, writing code or teaching children, in animation or accounting, this is the modern proletariat. The **class**, in addition to waged workers, includes their children, full-time homemakers, adult students, and those unemployed and retired. Meanwhile one reason for the decline in industrial jobs in the U.S. is that many jobs have been sent overseas. There has been an enormous expansion of industrial workers throughout the “Third World,” for this and other reasons. This is not a proof of the irrelevance of the working class.

It is also an empirical fact that most workers and their families are not revolutionary—and many are even reactionary. This is cited by post-anarchists (and others) as disproving a supposed prediction that the working class must inevitably become revolutionary. Actually the

“prediction” is only that the working class is potentially revolutionary, and able to shake the whole society when it is. This is evidenced by a two-centuries long history of workers’ struggles and upheavals. In any case, it is not that we could reject the (currently) non-revolutionary class for some other grouping which is revolutionary. Since such a large proportion of the world’s population is working class, the non-revolutionary consciousness of most of the working class means that most of the general population is not revolutionary, that most women are not revolutionary, nor are most People of Color, nor is any other category we could name. For now.

Perhaps Newman’s major discontent with a working class perspective is his belief that it would suppress all other sources of discontent and rebellion. “*Radical political struggles can no longer be limited to the proletariat alone, and must be seen as being open to other classes and social identities.*” (33) “*The movement...rejects the false universality of Marxist politics, which denies difference and heterogeneity and subordinates other struggles to the central role of the proletariat....*” (37)

There is no doubt that there have been wooden Marxists and wooden anarcho-syndicalists who have denied the importance of everything but the class struggle. (There have also been feminists who have subordinated all issues to that of women’s freedom, and Black activists who have put everything aside but Black liberation. But that is not the question here.) However this is not an inevitable result of a class perspective. On the contrary, it can be seen as strengthening the class struggle if the revolutionary workers support each and every struggle of oppressed people. The socialist Daniel DeLeon once said (quoting from memory) that socialists’ support for women’s liberation could unify the working class and split the ruling class.

To cite an authoritative (and authoritarian) Marxist, Lenin opposed “economism,” the strategy of only supporting bread-and-butter labor union issues. Instead he argued that socialists should defend every democratic concern, no matter how apparently far from class. This included supporting big groups such as peasants, women, and oppressed nations, but also students, draftees, censored writers, and religious minorities. “*To imagine that social revolution is conceivable without...a movement of the... masses against oppression by the landowners, the church, and the monarchy, against national oppression, etc. – to imagine all this is to repudiate social revolution. So one army lines up in one place and says, ‘We are for socialism’, and another, somewhere else and says, ‘We are for imperialism’, and that will be a social revolution!*” (Lenin 1916) I cite this sarcastic comment even though Lenin was not a libertarian-autonomous Marxist, to demonstrate that even such a Marxist as Lenin could advocate that working class socialists should give support to all popular struggles against oppression—by all classes, on all issues. (In any case, the problem anarchists have with Lenin is not that he gave too much support to democratic struggles.)

“The Global Capitalist State Order”

Newman sees a model of the kind of radical movement he wants in “*the emergence of what is broadly termed the ‘anti-globalization’ movement...*” (Newman 2004; 36) He describes this movement as distinct from either a “universalized” working class or from a bundle of unrelated identity-based struggles. The distinct struggles are linked to each other and have a common enemy, which turns out to be...capitalism! and the capitalist state! “*The ‘anti-globalization’ movement [is] a protest movement against the capitalist and neo-liberal vision of globalization...*” (36) The movement “*puts into question the global capitalist state order itself...It problematizes capitalism....targetting specific sites of oppression—corporate power and greed, G-M products, workplace*

surveillance, displacement of indigenous peoples, labor and human rights abuses, and so on.” (37) This only makes sense if we realize that these issues, overlapping with each other, are all directly or indirectly due to capitalism and enforced by the state. (For example, environmental, energy, and climate problems are due to the insatiable drive of capitalism to accumulate and grow quantitatively, regardless of the need of the ecosystem for limits and balance. The anarchist Bookchin explored this before the present ecological Marxists.)

“We are living in a historical moment...dominated by capitalism, the most universal system the world has ever known—both in the sense that it is global and in the sense that it penetrates every aspect of social life and the natural environment....The social reality of capitalism is ‘totalizing’ in unprecedented ways and degrees. Its logic of commodification, accumulation, profit-maximization, and competition permeates the whole social order....” (Woods 1997; 13)

If the problem is ultimately capitalism, then what is capitalism? (Newman does not define it any more than he defines the state.) Capitalism is the capital-labor relationship in the process of production. Capital commodifies everything it can, including the ability of the workers to labor. Capital buys this labor-power and squeezes out as much surplus wealth (value) from the workers as possible, accumulating profits and expanding production. All the other issues and struggles against aspects of oppression are real and must be addressed, but the central issue of capitalism as such is its exploitation of the workers. And who will oppose capitalism? Is it in the immediate interests of the rich, the managers, the police, or various indeterminate “citizens” to revolt against capitalism? No one has a greater immediate interest in fighting capitalism than those who directly confront it day by day. No one has a greater potential ability to fight it, with their hands on the means of production, distribution, and services.

That is what makes the class struggle—if not “universal”—then central to the fight against “*the global capitalist state order.*” It is central, and necessary—but not sufficient by itself, since all sections of the oppressed need to be mobilized, on every issue, “*against the capitalist and neo-liberal vision of globalization.*”

Conclusion: The State Serves the Class Enemy

In recent years there has been a bitter and vicious class war, on an international scale. It has been waged by the capitalist class, using all its resources, most especially its state. There has been a remorseless attack on the working class in both the industrialized (imperialist) nations and in the rest of the world. Hard-won welfare benefits have been slashed, austerity has been enforced, and unions have been cut in number and power. As part of this class war, there has been an attack on the rights of women, of African-Americans, of immigrants, and of LGBTQ people. For the sake of profits, the environment has been trashed and looted, until the survival of civilization (even such as it is) is threatened.

This is hardly the time to deny that capitalist exploitation is at the center of all issues. And that, while the state is intrinsically oppressive, it serves the class enemy.

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