Chapter Four

Contagious Politics: Posthuman anarchism

Saul Newman

The Covid-19 pandemic is not only a global public health crisis, but also presents a major crisis of legitimacy for our political institutions and, indeed, for the existing structure of our society; and it is likely to have far-reaching and long-lasting consequences. Most obviously, we think about the extraordinary emergency powers employed by governments around the world, democratic and authoritarian alike, to lock down millions of their citizens and to impose unprecedented restrictions on social life and economic activity. Will this become a permanent feature of life, where routinely and with very little democratic oversight, states of emergency will be declared in the name of protecting public health? Surely this verifies Foucault's thesis about the way that the biopolitical management of life displaces or, rather, overwrites sovereignty in the modern period.

The pandemic is not only testing democratic regimes to breaking point, but has led to a fundamental questioning of the legitimacy of neoliberal forms of governance, as we rediscover the importance of public services and, indeed, of social solidarity. It has also intensified and accelerated political antagonisms between left and right, with 'culture wars' now being fought over the symbolism of mask wearing or the legitimacy of lockdowns. Such antagonisms have given further impetus to right-wing populism, which, fuelled by outlandish conspiracy theories (which have also spread like a virus in recent times) in some cases now takes the form of open insurgency. We have also witnessed protests and spontaneous mobilizations around the world against police violence, racial and economic injustice, and ecological destruction. All these forms of politics, despite their differences, can be understood as a reaction to a (neo)liberal global economic order that has lost any sense of symbolic efficacy. What is revealed is the 'anarchy' at its core, as it is increasingly incapable of managing the crises - economic and ecological - that it generates. No wonder the prevailing condition today is a deeply nihilistic one. This crisis of legitimacy produces what I call contagious politics, characterised by unpredictable irruptions, unstable political forms, and unlikely ideological affinities: the way, for instance, that many

anti-lockdown protests involve conspiracy theorists and New Age antivaxxers, and people on the far-left and the far-right. Political issues and struggles instantaneously 'go viral', and traverse borders, much like the virus itself. There is also a breakdown of trust in traditional political institutions and once accepted sources of political and epistemological authority; the political class and parliamentary institutions, along with the mainstream media, are openly held in disdain. Covid-19 has released, after a long period of incubation, political viruses that are transforming the social landscape. These new antagonisms may also be seen as symptomatic of the posthuman political condition. If the pandemic has revealed anything, it is the vulnerability of our bodies and the permeability of our societies to unpredictable natural and biological forces, which we once believed we could control. It has brought home to us our dependence upon natural ecosystems which we have seriously disrupted. The fact that this global pandemic spread through a chance encounter between human and animal, emerging as a result of our commercial exploitation and domination of non-human species, ought to remind us not only of the disastrous consequences of our activity on the natural environment, but also of our interconnectedness with broader networks of relations which we have made dangerously unstable. The astonishing way in which a microscopic biological organism (apparently all the virus particles that exist in the world take up the same space as a can of Coke) can bring human activity to a grinding halt symbolises, in a dramatic fashion, the decentring of the figure of Man characteristic of the posthuman condition.[1] It is perhaps not surprising that this traumatic experience produces such divergent political reactions, from the climate change denialism of the right-wing populists, who seek to cling onto the anthropocentric illusion of our dominion over the natural world, to movements for climate justice like Extinction Rebellion, which demand governments declare a climate emergency.

The sense of crisis and emergency – of the loss of control over our destiny – opens up a new and unpredictable horizon, a shifting and 'anarchic' ontological ground, which no longer provides a secure foundation for political experience. This is an uncertain ground which we now have to navigate, and in which are forced to think 'without a bannister', as Hannah Arendt would say.

How, then, can we make sense of this political horizon opened up by the pandemic? What kinds of theoretical and conceptual tools are available to us to grasp what is essentially a new political condition? And how might we respond? One way

to understand this 'anarchic' condition – by which I mean the absence of central, dominant or founding signifier – is through anarchist theory itself. Anarchism, I would argue, has some important things to say about our contemporary political moment. Much has been written about the anarchist currents and influences in radical political mobilizations over the past decade, from Occupy Wall Street to forms of 'networked' politics and new social movements characterised by decentralised decision-making and a resistance to the usual channels of political representation and communication.[2] This is a new kind of insurrectionary politics, where the goal is no longer the revolutionary seizure of state power – as in the Marxist-Leninist model – but rather the deposing or de-legitimising of existing political institutions; what Giorgio Agamben refers to as 'de-instituting' or 'destituent power'.[3]

In making reference to the ontological anarchy characteristic of the posthuman experience, I am also pointing to something beyond the conceptual confines of classical anarchist theory – the revolutionary anarchist philosophies and projects that emerged from nineteenth century thinkers like Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Mikhail Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin. Instead, a more apt way to grasp the politics of the posthuman condition is through what I call postanarchism.

Postanarchism

Postanarchism has emerged as a central genre in contemporary radical political thought. While it has followed different paths and trajectories, it can generally be understood as a reformulation of the classical doctrine of anarchism through an engagement with poststructuralist theory. It acknowledges many of the key insights from thinkers like Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari and Jacques Lacan, among others. In this sense, postanarchism can be understood as 'poststructuralist' anarchism. As I have argued elsewhere, poststructural theory has important consequences for contemporary anarchism.[4] While it presents a central challenge to the foundationalist ontology of the classical anarchism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – particularly in terms of its assumptions about human nature and the possibilities of a rational social order - it also fosters a renewal of anarchism in ways that make it more relevant to contemporary forms of radical politics.

Some time ago, Jean-Francois Lyotard announced the 'postmodern condition': a condition characterised by the collapse of the 'metanarrative', in which people no

longer believed in the grand narratives of modernity and expressed an increasing scepticism towards traditional sources of epistemic authority, and even scientific knowledge.[5] No doubt this has ambiguous consequences. On the one hand, it seems to resonate with the contemporary 'post-truth' condition, in which competing narratives and 'alternative facts' obfuscate and decentre the symbolic order of truth; a condition which is manipulated by right-wing populists who, in a paradoxical fashion, use it to impose their own alternative order of truth on the world.[6] At the same time, the post-modern condition, in its challenge to the dominant philosophical narratives - like modernity, the Enlightenment and Humanism – also has, I would argue, potentially emancipatory consequences, coinciding with the posthuman political experience.

As I have suggested, we are seeing the exhaustion of a particular way of experiencing the world and our place within it. This paradigm was founded on anthropological certainties and a Promethean faith in human progress, technological development, and limitless economic growth. Yet today, as we are faced with imminent ecological collapse, we are forced to question not only our relationship with the natural world, but also our own centrality and significance in a world that increasingly takes the form of a network, an entangled series of relations in which we are inexorably bound to one another, as well as to non-human life-forms and ecosystems, and even to material objects. As Cary Wolfe explains, posthumanism is the acknowledgement of the embeddedness of the human within broader social systems – natural, communicative, cultural, technological and so on – which blurs the binary division between the human and non-human, while at the same time giving greater meaning and specificity to the human condition.[7] It is to acknowledge that we are, as he puts it, fundamentally prosthetic creatures who have evolved with non-human forms which, paradoxically, are also what define what it is to be human. Posthumanism refers to the recognition of the way we as humans are situated within, dependent upon and, to speak in Derridean terms, *supplemented* by networks, relations, and lifeforms, both human and non-human, that are beyond our immediate control. This unsettles us, limits our sense of mastery and autonomy – or rather the illusion of autonomy in the strictly individualistic and anthropocentric sense – and forces an opening towards the other. This does not signify the end of the human experience as such, but rather an auto-critique or auto-deconstruction of the discursive limits of humanism. The ecological crisis and the threat of the collapse of ecosystems upon which all human life depends, is perhaps the clearest example of the decentring of Man from his world.

Whether our long-term response to this will take the reactive or paranoid form that we are presently witnessing, or the invention of new forms of commonality and solidarity with the natural and non-human world[8] – which we are also seeing some signs of – remains an open question.

There are some important parallels, which I will draw out below, between posthumanism and postanarchism. Postanarchism is an attempt to reformulate anarchist theory in the wake of the end of Enlightenment humanism as the guiding narrative of modernity. It is a way of understanding anti-authoritarian politics and ethics in the context of what Foucault referred to as the disappearance of Man[9], and without the ontological and epistemological guarantees that this figure once provided.

Deconstruction and reconstruction

Postanarchism involves two main theoretical moves. *Firstly*, it is a critical deconstruction of some of the epistemological limits of the nineteenth century paradigm of classical anarchism. This was an anarchism borne of the revolutionary optimism of Enlightenment modernity. It was an anarchism that believed that the revolution would emancipate the whole of humanity and transform the entirety of social relations, ushering in harmonious and cooperative forms of coexistence. Underlying this vision of social relations was the belief in an immanent rationality and morality - obscured and distorted by existing political and economic structures, as well as by religion and ideological mystification - that would nevertheless be revealed once these artificial institutions had been overthrown. There was a faith in the inherent sociability of mankind, which would form the basis of a self-governing community. This is why the sovereign political state was seen by anarchists as an unnecessary and destructive intrusion upon an otherwise rationally ordered society, why it was regarded as an obstacle to human progress and flourishing. What is central to classical anarchism is a kind of Manichean logic that assumes an ontological separation between humanity and power. Power, embodied in the state and in other social institutions, is seen as an alien coercive force that limits and distorts people's natural rational and moral capacities for freedom, development and sociability. Poststructuralism sharpens an auto-critique already immanent within anarchism itself. Indeed, poststructuralism, might be seen as a kind of continuation of the anti-authoritarian impulse of anarchism itself, but turning its critique on discursive and epistemological authority and fixed identities. For Derrida, poststructuralism is an

attempt to break with the 'chain of substitutions' that reaffirms the authority and determining power of a centre – whether it is God, man, consciousness, or even the structure of language itself.[10] In this sense, what unites the diverse strands of poststructuralism is the rejection of the discourse of essentialist humanism, or what Derrida would refer to as the metaphysics of presence: the idea that there is a fixed, determined and determining identity (whether it is Power, Man, Truth, the Good) behind or at the origin of the play of signifiers and social forces.

In view of this deconstructive approach, we must ask ourselves whether we can make the same assumptions about subjectivity held by the anarchists of the nineteenth century. Starting with the nineteenth century thinker, Max Stirner, who argued that human essence was an ideological illusion and a hangover from religion and metaphysics, through to Foucault, who rejected any idea of a universal Subject behind the various historically specific ways in which subjectivity is constituted by power and discursive regimes of truth, the unity of the subject as a transhistorical entity has been placed in doubt. One of the key points to be taken from Foucault, and other poststructuralist thinkers, is that there can be no ontological separation between the subject and external social forces, including power. The subject who resists power is also in part constituted by it: 'The man described for us, whom we are invited to free, is already in himself the effect of a subjection much more profound than himself.'[11] The decentering of the subject is also present in the psychoanalytic theories of Jacques Lacan, who claimed that the subject is the subject of language as an external order of signifiers and is, moreover, founded on a fundamental lack, an incompleteness that propels the dialectic of desire without fulfillment. In a different way, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari saw desire as a multiplicity of social forces that cut across and fragment the individual, connecting the human and non-human, man, animal, and machine.

Poststructuralism also places in doubt the very idea of revolution itself, if by revolution we understand a total transformation of social, political, and economic relations and the liberation from power. Where and how a revolution can emerge from a field saturated and power relations, and what it is able to achieve, is a question we must ask ourselves today. The idea of a revolution, as a struggle aimed at overthrowing of hierarchical power, evades the reality that, in late modernity, power relations are much more decentralised, complex, and take the form of overlapping and all-pervasive networks of communication, surveillance and control, rather than a

centralised and clearly identifiable political structure.[12] Moreover, the notion of revolution was part of a modernist paradigm, in which Man acts on the world in a Promethean way, and attempts to transform the entirety of social relations in a single totalizing and collective political event. Invested in this fantasy is the idea that the revolution would liberate humanity, once and for all, from all kinds of oppressions and artificial limitations and usher in an eternal state of freedom and harmony. Instead, postanarchism embraces Foucault's insight, that, rather than speaking about 'liberation', we should think in terms of ongoing 'practices of freedom' that are engaged in a continual contestation with the power relations and limits, limits that will exist in *any* society.[13] Today, the invention of alternative communities, ways of living, non-capitalistic forms of exchange based on the idea of the commons, and, above all, non-violent ways of relating to other living beings, human and non-human, can all be seen as ethical 'practices of freedom' in this sense.

The encounter with poststructuralist theory no doubt poses certain problems for anarchism, particularly regarding the humanist epistemological and ontological limits that it was initially framed within. At the same time, it presents the challenge to think what anarchism might mean as a political and ethical project, without the ontological certainties and moral and rational foundations it once relied upon. Therefore, the *second* move central to postanarchism is 'reconstructive': an understanding of postanarchism as a positive political and ethical strategy or series of strategies that can inform contemporary radical struggles and movements. Below I outline a number of ethical coordinates for thinking about these new modes of radical political engagement.

Voluntary (in)servitude[14]
Perhaps the main ethical and political problem that postanarchism grapples with is what Étienne de La Boétie termed, several centuries ago, *servitude volontaire* – the phenomenon of voluntary obedience to tyrannical power. This is an obedience that was not coerced but freely given, and it was this which was, for La Boétie in the sixteenth century as it remains for us today, the fundamental enigma of politics. The paradox of our time is one in which the decline of traditional structures of patriarchal authority and centralized political power is accompanied by ever greater levels of conformity, docility, and obedience. The problem of voluntary servitude to some

extent overturns the humanist assumption that man always desires freedom; rather, the project of freedom becomes an ethical problem to be worked through. However, the key insight to be taken from La Boétie's radical analysis of obedience is that power has no consistency or stability of its own, but is something entirely dependent on, indeed constituted by, our free acceptance of it. Power would not exist if we did not choose to obey it. Put more radically, power is an illusion created by our own identification with it; power, on its own, does not exist. This means that just as the constitution of power is a matter of will and free volition, so is its undoing. As La Boétie put it, 'Resolve to serve no more, and you are at once freed.'[15] We overcome power, not by destroying it as such, but by simply refusing to recognise it, by turning our backs upon it; the reflexive illusion of power, constituted by our own obedience, is thus dispelled.

Singularities

We need another way of thinking about subjectivity that is no longer confined to identity. As Foucault put it, 'maybe the target nowadays is not to discover who we are but to refuse who we are.'[16] Even though marginalized identities, whether cultural, religious, sexual or gender, are so often subject to violence and oppression, the problem is that in confining one's struggle to a demand for recognition and inclusion within existing legal and institutional structures is a limitation of our political experience. The demand for identity recognition is a form of (neo)liberal biopolitics that does little to challenge structures of domination, exploitation, and violence. Instead, I suggest we think in terms of *singularities*. Singularities escape and slip between categories of identity. They are mutable, contingent and in a constant process of *becoming* - reconstituting themselves in relation to others and within networks of relations. Postanarchism places an emphasis on multiple forms of experimentation with different ways of living and relating to ourselves and to others. Here I am partly indebted to Stirner's radical concepts of 'ownness' and 'uniqueness'. While these are often wrongly conflated with a selfish egoism, Stirner understood the ego, or what he called the 'unique one', as an ongoing process of *flux*, *becoming* and *anarchic self-constitution*. However, rather than this being a solipsistic experience, Stirner believed that in clearing the ground of the ideological 'spooks' of humanism, it would open the way for new, more autonomous relations with the external world.

Yet, we need to think more carefully about the encounter between singularity and community. One of the most important political tasks today is to invent new ideas of community which do not destroy difference and uniqueness, but work to enhance it. Stirner's under-developed and paradoxical idea of the 'union of egoists' – a loose, rhizomatic collective association without any fixed identity or structure – points in this direction.[17] We could also consider more recent attempts within continental philosophy to rethink community in non-totalizing and non-exclusionary ways. Jean-Luc Nancy argued that, in the wake of the collapse of Communism, we could no longer return to some organic or essential idea of community based on nostalgia for shared traditions, culture and identity; precisely the vision of community invoked by right-wing populists today, which inevitably involves forms of exclusion and domination. Rather, we need to think about an alternative form of community that is constitutively open to singularity, and which resists the temptation to absorb differences into a totalizing collective identity.[18] Similarly, Roberto Esposito has critically explored the immunising paradigms and rationalities of modernity, which seek to protect and secure the identity and integrity of the body politic from the threat of contamination, whether from immigrants and stateless people, or even from biological agents like viruses. However, the danger is that these immunising impulses become 'auto-immunising' and end up destroying what they seek to protect. Esposito attempts to think beyond this 'immunitarian' logic through alternative understandings of commonality defined by gift (*munus*) and even debt, implying reciprocity, mutuality, and obligation.[19] Giorgio Agamben refers to 'whatever singularity' and 'the coming community', invoking the idea of gatherings and convergences that are not based on predefined identities (not based on 'who'), which are, in other words, *indifferent* to identity and are defined instead by their co-belonging. In strikingly anarchistic overtones, Agamben predicts that, 'the novelty of the coming politics is that it will no longer be a struggle for the conquest or control of the State, but a struggle between the State and the non-State (humanity), an insurmountable disjunction between whatever singularity and the State organization.'[20]

Insurrection

We must also think about political action in new ways, and this is where the notion of the insurrection becomes important. Following on from a number of themes outlined above, the insurrection might be seen as a kind of revolt not so much against the

external world of power – although that might be a consequence of it – but more so as a form ethical self-transformation, a revolt against fixed identities, modes of action and forms of life that power imposes upon us or which we have freely internalised. Again, I am indebted to Stirner here and his idea of the Empörung (*Uprising*):

Revolution and insurrection must not be looked upon as synonymous. The former consists in an overturning of conditions, of the established condition or *status*, the state or society, and is accordingly a *political* or *social* act; the latter has indeed for its unavoidable consequence a transformation of circumstances, yet does not start from it but from men's discontent with themselves, is not an armed rising but a rising of individuals, a getting up without regard to the *arrangements* that spring from it. The Revolution aimed at new arrangements; insurrection leads us no longer to *let* ourselves be arranged, but to arrange ourselves, and sets no glittering hopes on 'institutions'. It is not a fight against the established, since, if it prospers, the established collapses of itself; it is only a working forth of me out of the established.[21]

While the revolution works to transform external social and political conditions and institutions, the insurrection is aimed at one's own self-transformation. To engage in an insurrection means placing oneself *above* external conditions and constraints, whereupon these constraints simply disintegrate. It starts from the affirmation of the self, and the political consequences flow from this. The insurrection, unlike the revolution, is radically anti-institutional; not necessarily in the sense of seeking to get rid of all institutions, as this would lead simply to different kinds of institutions emerging in their place, but rather in the sense of asserting one's power over institutions and, indeed, one's indifference to them. This notion of insurrection is radically different from most understandings of radical political action. It eschews the idea of an overarching project of social transformation. Freedom is not the end goal of the insurrection but, rather, its starting point. What Stirner's notion of insurrection highlights is the extent to which we are often complicit with the systems of power that we see as dominating.

Prefigurative politics

Perhaps we need to understand power not as a substance or a thing, but as a relationship we forge and renew everyday through our actions and our relations with

others. As the anarchist Gustav Landauer put it: 'The state is a social relationship; a certain way of people relating to one another. It can be destroyed by creating new social relationships; i.e., by people relating to one another differently.'[22] He places the emphasis not so much on the revolutionary seizure or destruction of the external system of power, but rather on a micro-political and ethical transformation of the self and its relation to others, and the creation of alternative and more autonomous relations; the result of which is the transcendence of state power. Here Landauer touches on one of the key ethical principles of anarchism, one also shared by postanarchism: prefiguration. Prefiguration is the idea that the type of politics one engages in should already reflect or *prefigure* the type of society, the kind of social relations, one wishes to create. Prefiguration is therefore a kind of anti-strategic and, indeed, ethical impulse. It is the idea that one's moral principles should not be sacrificed to the exigencies of politics, that the ends do not always justify the means. For instance, if you aim to build a society without violence, then you should not use violent means to achieve this; if you want a society without domination, then you should not employ authoritarian or vanguardist measures in one's revolutionary strategy. Understood in this way, prefiguration also means acting on the present, in the *here and now,* working to modify, at a micropolitical level, one's immediate environment and one's relations with others. As Bakunin warned in his debates with Marx and his followers in the First International, the use of authoritarian measures in a revolutionary struggle, and the instrumentalization of state power to build socialism, would only lead to a replication of the structures of state authority and an intensification of its power.

In considering pre-figurative practices in the context of the posthuman political condition, we have much to learn from thinkers like Ivan Illich, who argued as early as the 1970s that modern institutions and technologies – schooling, corporate health care, mass transit systems, and industrial technology generally – had reached a point of crisis in efficiency and effectiveness, robbing people of their autonomy and their capacity to manage their own lives. Modern medicine made people less healthy and more vulnerable to sickness, with more iatrogenic diseases and a greater reliance on drugs. Modern transportation – our reliance on cars - means that we spend more time travelling; the faster we can go, the slower we become. Modern education had diminished our capacity for self-learning. Today we could make the same point about faster connectivity of communication networks and devices, which is supposed to

save time, but which actually means we waste greater amounts of time 'staying connected'. Our over-reliance on antibiotics, as a result of our dependence on the pharmaceutical industry to administer our health care needs, has led to our greater susceptibility to new strains drug resistant bacteria. And so on. In place of these systems, Illich proposed 'tools of conviviality' - human scaled technologies and systems designed to empower people to manage their own lives and wean them off their dependency on big institutions: 'I choose the term 'conviviality' to designate the opposite of industrial productivity. I intend it to mean autonomous and creative intercourse among persons, and the intercourse of persons with their environment… I consider conviviality to be individual freedom realized in personal interdependence and, as such, an intrinsic ethical value.'[23]

Important here also is the emphasis on human limitation: not only will industrial and technological development and economic growth run up against their own internal limit (what is called entropy), but also, in order to live sustainably and for society to achieve homeostasis, people will need to limit their own activity and consumption. However, rather than this being a miserable condition, it is something to be welcomed. Illich talks about a 'right to frugality'. He proposes that reducing our needless consumption and learning to live with simpler, but more useful, technology, coupled with a more just distribution of resources and power, would free up time for self-expression and for more convivial relations with others. Perhaps this might be one of the positive outcomes of the current pandemic. Today we see many such experiments in autonomy and conviviality, forms of practical anarchy, where people in transnational networks or local and regional communities, try to foster more sustainable ways of working, farming, consuming and living, organising movements and networks in defence of common natural resources, indigenous lands and the local environment against corporate and state enclosure and development; or more recently, forms of mutual aid and networks of solidarity springing up in response to the pandemic. The current crisis has shown us the destructive hubris of our current way of living, with its obsession with work, productivity and economic growth, and our exploitation of the natural world and non-human species. It has hopefully taught us the value of a different way of life, one that is more autonomous and sustainable.

Ecological entanglement

12

Postanarchism rejects an anthropocentric view of the world, and embraces instead an ethics and politics of entanglement with the non-human natural world. Of course, an ecological sensibility has never been alien to anarchist theory or practice. We think of the variants of anarchism which take into account our connections with the natural world: from Murray Bookchin's theory of social ecology, which explored the interrelationship between ecological and social domination,[24] to even more radical elements of deep green ecology and 'anti-civilizational' or 'primitivist' anarchism.[25] However, where postanarchism departs, particularly from Bookchin's 'dialectical naturalism', is in rejecting the idea of a rational totality or wholeness that is somehow immanent within social relations and whose emergence will bring about a rational harmonisation of social forces and the full humanisation of Man. Bookchin says: 'By wholeness, I mean varying levels of actualization, an unfolding of a wealth of particularities, that are latent in an as-yet-undeveloped potentiality. This potentiality may be a newly planted seed, a newly born infant, a newly born community, or a newly born society.'[26] However, can we assume that the possibilities of human freedom lie rooted in the natural order, as a secret waiting to be discovered, as a flower waiting to blossom, to use Bookchin's metaphor? Can we assume that there is a rational unfolding of possibilities, driven, in a Hegelian manner, by a unified historical and social logic? This would seem to fall into the trap of essentialism, whereby there is a rational essence or being at the foundation of society whose truth we must perceive. There is an implicit positivism here, in which political and social phenomena are seen as conditioned by natural principles and scientifically observable conditions. A postanarchist perspective is sceptical of this view of a social order founded on deep rational principles. Indeed, this is part of the very anthropocentric/anthropomorphic paradigm that has contributed to the objectification and instrumentalization of the natural world. Rather than nature providing the basis for a stable and rational social order, ecological entanglement embodies indeterminacy and contingency; it means that all social identities now have be considered as part of an unstable, unpredictable network of relations, of ecosystems that are constantly changing and adapting and therefore disrupting any fixed or consistent image of a social order. A similar point is made by Bruno Latour, who develops an alternative idea of 'political ecology' based on our place within unstable and unpredictable *assemblages* of relations with non-human entities, in which 'nature'

acts upon and shapes the meaning of politics, just as politics acts upon and shapes the natural world.[27]

Yet, while classical anarchism, in its assumptions about human nature, is in many ways part of the humanist paradigm of modernity, it also goes beyond this. For instance, in Peter Kropotkin's idea of 'mutual aid'[28] we find ideas of solidarity and cooperation based on shared biological and evolutionary instincts between humans and non-humans – something that challenged the anthropocentric view of the world as well as a crude articulation of Darwinian theory that saw the natural (and social) world only in terms of the 'survival of the fittest'. The philosopher Catherine Malabou has recently sought to rethink Kropotkin's idea of mutual aid as a basis for social solidarity and political mutuality. Importantly, she argues – in contradistinction to postanarchist critiques of Kropotkin's biological determinism[29] – that his evolutionary theory, which he derives from observations of animal species, disrupts the boundaries between philosophy, politics, and biology, between the human and natural worlds. She says in an interview:

> This would also give me the opportunity of questioning the frontier between traditional anarchism and what has been called post-anarchism, a grouping of several trends and lines of thought that seek to reconcile libertarianism with post-structuralism. Post-anarchism is very critical of thinkers like Kropotkin, whom they judge essentialist and rationalist because of his use of biology and evolutionism. Such a rejection is what I intend to challenge, thus renewing also Kropotkin's definition of mutual aid. In his work, mutual aid appears as the other trend of evolution, along with natural selection. Living beings do not only compete, they also help each other. Political mutuality keeps something of this biological memory. Mutual help is not only support and solidarity; it is self-management, cooperative economy, organic symbiosis or ecological bioregionalism. So this is what I am currently exploring, showing that mutual help, or aid, does not constitute a *telos* in the traditional sense, but an emancipatory orientation.[30]

While I would insist that there is a rational *telos* at the heart of Kropotkin's evolutionary theory – something that at the same time drives its emancipatory politics – what I think is interesting in Malabou's interpretation of mutual aid is the way that it is oriented towards a posthuman terrain of interspecies cooperation and disrupts the neat boundaries between human and non-human lifeworlds.

Ontological anarchy, or 'anarchaeology'

Many of the ideas and themes I have been outlining here are reflective of a condition that can be referred to as *ontological anarchy*. The Heideggerian thinker Reiner Schürmann defines anarchy as the withering away of the epochal first principles, the *arché* that defined metaphysical thinking:

> The anarchy that will be at issue here is the name of a history affecting the ground or foundation of action, a history where the bedrock yields and where it becomes obvious that the principle of cohesion, be it authoritarian or 'rational', is no longer anything more than a blank space deprived of legislative, normative, power.[31]

For Schürmann, this is an experience of freedom: it frees action from its *telos*, from fixed normative frameworks, from the rule of ends that hitherto sought to determine it. Action becomes 'anarchic', that is to say, groundless and without a pre-determined end. Importantly, he differentiates this idea of anarchy from the political ideas and programmes of anarchist theoreticians like Bakunin, Proudhon, and Kropotkin, who, on Schürmann's reading, simply sought to replace one founding principle, the political authority of the state (*princeps*), with another, rationality (*principium*): 'as metaphysical an operation as there has ever been.'[32]

Foucault, in one of his lectures at the College de France from 1979-80, described his methodological approach as 'anarchaeological'. It starts from the presupposition that 'there is no universal, immediate, and obvious right that can everywhere and always support any kind of relation of power.'[33] This is not the same as saying that all power is bad; rather it means that no form of power is *automatically* admissible or incontestable. This ethico-political standpoint is one that is largely consistent with most forms of anarchism. However, where it differs is in making the non-acceptability of power one's *point of departure* rather than one's end point. In other words, perhaps we need think of anarchism today not so much as a specific revolutionary project, but rather as an open and contingent form of action that takes the non-acceptance of power as its starting point. Can we understand anarchism as a politics that starts, rather than (necessarily) ends up with, anarchy? To quote Foucault:

> it is not a question of having in view, at the end of a project, a society without power relations. It is rather a matter of putting non-power or the non-acceptability of power, not at the end of the enterprise, but rather at the

beginning of the work in the form a questioning of all the ways in which power is in actual fact accepted.[34]

So, perhaps contemporary forms of anarchism should be seen not as pre-determined by fixed objectives, but rather as based on a certain contingency, open-endedness and freedom of thought and action. It does not have a pre-determined ideological shape, but may take different forms and follow different courses of action at different moments. It might resist and contest specific relations of power at localised points of intensity, on the basis of their illegitimacy and violence; it might work against certain institutions and institutional practices by either working within and in support of other kinds of institutions, or through creating alternative practices and forms of organisation. In other words, taking anarchy or non-power as its starting point, postanarchism as a form of experimental and autonomous thinking and acting, can work on multiple fronts, in a variety of different settings, institutional and non-institutional, producing reversals and interruptions of existing relations of domination.

Conclusion

This flexibility in anarchism refers to what Malabou calls its *plasticity*. She said in an interview, in response to a question about how she thinks her theoretical concept of plasticity should be received:

> What would interest me is to see how we can solve the contradiction, philosophically and politically, of why we resist plasticity. How is it that some people can still be in control in a very non-plastic way of plasticity itself? How does this lead to fascisms and the new forms of extreme authoritarian regimes which all define themselves as anti-plastic? I would expect different ways of exploring what I now call 'the possibility of 'anarchy'.[35]

It would seem, then, that the implications of ontological anarchy – or plasticity - for radical politics today are highly ambiguous. On the one hand, anarchism must embrace the experience of anarchy and no longer rely on firm ontological foundations once provided by humanism. The experience of the contemporary world suggests that the tectonic plates of our age are shifting, that familiar and once hegemonic institutions, principles, and philosophical categories – economic, political and above all anthropological – appear increasingly empty, lifeless, and obsolete, or at the very least are in a state of crisis. Never has political and financial power been in a more

precarious position. Never before have we been confronted in such a dramatic way with the extreme consequences of the Anthropocene condition, whereby the survival of all species, including our own, is threatened. This makes possible, indeed *necessitates*, new and more autonomous forms of action, communication, economic exchange and being in common. On the other hand, this sense we all have of an increasingly dislocated world, spinning off its hinges, fragmenting before our very eyes, confronts us with immense and unparalleled dangers: the empty nihilism and destructiveness of the global capitalist machine (and here the Anthropocene can only be understood in relation to the Capitalocene)[36] and the appearance of apocalyptic and fascistic forms of politics that seem intent on hastening the coming disorder. The condition of ontological anarchy is always accompanied by the temptation to restore the principle of authority, to fill in its empty place with new proliferations of power. We realise that power itself has become dangerously anarchic.

Against this blind and nihilistic drive, anarchism today must affirm a kind of ethical care or even conservation of the networks and ecosystems in which we are entangled, for a natural world faced with ecological collapse, as well as cultivate and affirm new forms of life, community and autonomy which are already being made possible by the ontological rift opening before us.

Notes

[1] Francesca Ferrando, *Philosophical Posthumanism,* London: Bloomsbury, 2019.

[2] See for instance: Richard J. F Day, *Gramsci is Dead: Anarchist Currents in the Newest Social Movements,* London: Pluto Press, 2005; David Graeber, *The Democracy Project: A History, a Crisis, a Movement,* New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2013; Paolo Gerbaudo, *The Mask and the Flag: Populism, Citizenism and Global Protest,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017; Mark Bray, *Translating Anarchy: The Anarchism of Occupy Wall Street,* London: Zero Books, 2013; Marianne Maeckelbergh, *The Will of the Many: How the Alterglobalisation Movement Is Changing the Face of Democracy*, London: Pluto Press, 2009.

[3] Saul Newman, 'What is an Insurrection?' *Political Studies* 5(2) 2017: 284–299.

[4] Saul Newman, *From Bakunin to Lacan: anti-authoritarianism and the dislocation of power,* Maryland, MD.: Lexington Books, 2001; and *Postanarchism*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016.

[5] Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge,* trans., Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1979.

[6] Saul Newman, 'Post-Truth and the Crisis of the Political', *Soft Power* 6(2) 2019: 91-108.

[7] Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010, xxv

[8] See Erika Cudworth and Stephen Hobden, *The Emancipatory Project of Posthumanism,* London and New York: Routledge 2018.

[9] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: an Archaeology of the Human Sciences,* London and New York: Routledge, 2005.

[10] Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. A. Bass, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.

[11] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*, trans. A. Sheridan. London: Penguin Books, 1991, 30.

[12] See, for instance, Gilles Deleuze's idea of the 'control society' in 'Postscript on the Societies of Control', *October*, Vol. 59 (Winter) 1992: 3-7.

[13] Michel Foucault, 'The Ethics of the Concern for the Self as a Practice of Freedom', in *Ethics: Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984*, Vol. 1, ed. P. Rabinow, trans. R. Hurley et al., London: Penguin, 2000, 281–302.

[14] I borrow this term 'voluntary inservitude' from Foucault, who says that: 'Critique will be the art of voluntary inservitude, of reflective indocility'. See Michel Foucault, 'What is Critique?' In: *What is Enlightenment? Eighteenth Century Answers and Twentieth Century Questions.* Schmidt, James (ed.) Berkeley, CA.: University of California Press, 1996, 382-398, 386.

[15] Étienne de La Boétie, 'Discourse de la servitude volontaire' (*The Politics of Obedience: The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude.* Trans., Harry Kurz, Auburn, Alabama: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2008, 47.

[16] Michel Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984,* ed. James Faubion, trans. Roberty Hurley et al., London: Penguin, 2000, 326–48.

[17] Max Stirner, *The Ego and its Own*, ed. David Leopold, trans. S. Byington, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, 161.

[18] Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community.* Translated by Peter Connor et al., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.

[19] Roberto Esposito, *Communitas: the Origin and Destiny of Community,* trans., Timothy Campbell, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009.

[20] Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community,* trans., Michael Hardt, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

[21] Stirner, *The Ego and its Own,* 279-80.

[22] Gustav Landauer, 'Weak State, Weaker People' in G. Kuhn (Ed) *Gustav Landauer: Revolution and Other Writings, a Political Reader,* Oakland, Ca.: PM Press, 2010, 213-214.

[23] Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality.* New York: Fontana/ Collins, 1975, 24.

[24] Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy*, Palo Alto, CA: Cheshire Books, 1982.

[25] See for instance, John Zerzan, *Elements of Refusal,* Columbia: CAL Press, 1999' and *Future Primitive and Other Essays,* New York: Autonomedia, 1994.

[26] Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom,* 31.

[27] Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy,* trans., Catherine Porter, Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press. See also, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climactic Regime*, trans., Catherine Porter, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017.

[28] Peter Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*, ed., Paul Avrich, New York: New York University Press, 1972.

[29] Saul Newman, *The Politics of Postanarchism,* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010.

[30] Interview with Catherine Malabou by Gerardo Flores Peña (July 25th, 2017) *Figure/Ground* < http://figureground.org/interview-with-catherine-malabou/>

[31] Reiner Schürmann, *Heidegger on Being and Acting: From Principles to Anarchy,* trans., C-M Gros, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987, 6.

[32] Ibid., 7.

[33] Michel Foucault, *On the Government of the Living, Lectures at the College de France 1979-80,* ed., M. Senellart, trans., G. Burchell, Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 77.

[34] Ibid., 78.

[35] Benjamin Dalton, 'What should we do with plasticity? An Interview with Catherine Malabou', *Paragraph*, 42(2): 238-254. See also 'What Pleasure is there in Thinking Today?' (Interview with Catherine Malabou) *Spike Art Magazine* #64 Summer 2020 < https://www.spikeartmagazine.com/articles/qa-catherine-malabou> (accessed 10 February 2021)

[36] See Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene,* Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016.