

Review Article

On the Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism

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Abstract: This review essay offers a critical evaluation of Todd May's foundational work, *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism* (1994). It examines May's tripartite taxonomy of political thought – distinguishing between formal, strategic, and tactical political philosophy – and examines his proposition that poststructuralism operates as a tactical framework capable of surmounting the totalizing and representational limits of both liberalism and orthodox Marxism. The essay highlights May's articulate exposition of French poststructuralism (most notably Foucault, Deleuze and Lyotard), particularly regarding the productive micro-physics of power, micropolitical resistance, anti-representational ethics and the promotion of localized difference. However, the review identifies a major methodological flaw in May's engagement with anarchist theory. By confining his analysis almost exclusively to Classical Anarchism (Bakunin, Kropotkin, Proudhon) and completely overlooking second-wave and post-WWII developments – such as the Situationist International – May constructs his argument upon a reductive and historically superseded premise. In short, the essay contends that May fails to establish a conceptual synthesis between poststructuralism and anarchism: whereas anarchism demands the complete abolition of hierarchical power relations, poststructuralism relies on the inescapable, creative deployment of power networks. The book thus stands as a compelling contribution to poststructuralist political philosophy rather than a viable theoretical ground for contemporary anarchism.

Keywords: anarchism; anti-representationalism; micro-physics of power; poststructuralism; tactical political philosophy

1. Introduction: May's Taxonomy of Political Philosophy

One could think Todd May's *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism* is a book on anarchism. However, for the most part, it is not. What the author actually aims to achieve is to scrutinize poststructuralism as a “framework of an alternative political philosophy, one that differs from its dominant predecessors, especially free-market liberalism and Marxism, not only in the vision it provides but also in the level and style of intervention it advocates” (May 1994, 3). During the introduction, and in order to achieve this goal, May proposes a clear distinction between three types of political philosophy: formal, strategic and tactical.

Formal political philosophy is mainly comprised by “its cleaving either to the pole of what ought to be or to the pole of what is at the expense of the tension between the two” (4). Its main purpose is to provide abstractions which allow political philosophers to define ideals for society and generate unitary explanations of social relations. A clear example of formal philosophy is Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* (1971), where principles like “justice” are established by decisions made from behind a “veil of ignorance”: an ideal situation where there is a clear answer on what an individual, free of personal biases, ought to do.

On the other hand, strategic political philosophy is characterized by “an immersion into the tension between the two (poles)” (7). The main difference is that it pinpoints that historical and social conditions do not happen according to necessity. There is an evident recognition that the conditions themselves are inconstant and subject to deep mutations. An ethical program is then deduced from those conditions in order to establish the possibilities for intervention within a specific paradigm. This way, strategic political philosophy is more concerned with the historical implementations of the political and with the more pragmatic methodological concerns of reaching the political goals advanced by a given political philosophy. It is not, however, concerned with the definition of principles; in strategic political philosophy, principles like “justice” are carved out of the conditions that an individual faces. Therefore, it becomes a project solely based on determining the best way to promote the assumed principles. This type of philosophy is frequent in Marxist and Classical Anarchist literature, where the assumption that power always emanates from a center of power – in this case, the *bourgeoisie*, the State, production relations, etc. – is, according to May, always present. There is clear tendency to picture the “world as a set of concentric circles, with the

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core or base problematic lying at the center, and the derivative problematics surrounding it at various distances” (10). Consequently, the focus on the *praxis* is ever-present, since it “involves a unitary analysis that aims toward a single goal” (10), usually one that involves the transformation of the center where power comes from.

Contrasting with both totalizing forms of political expression, tactical political philosophy seems to occupy a space between the two aforementioned poles, in constant oscillation between both of them. Contrary to strategic political philosophy, tactical approaches refuse the idea that there is a center of power. As May argues: “power, and consequently politics, are irreducible. There are many different sites from which it arises, and there is an interplay among these various sites in the creation of the social world” (11). Rejecting any unitary explanation, the tactical approach suggests power does not arise at a specific *locus* but instead at various mutually intersecting sites. “Power” is, therefore, an irreducible term. In practical terms, tactical political philosophy identifies that any fruitful intervention must be local, plural and, especially, non-representative. Given that there is no center of power, representation – for example, a vanguard party – is always an illegitimate usurpation of the wants and interests of the individual – in this case, the proletariat –, on the grounds that there are multiple impediments to achieve “justice” and not just the one which the vanguard party deems as the cause of injustice.

2. Marxism, Strategic Failure and the Rise of Tactical Thought

The focus on the tactical (i.e. poststructuralism) is the fundamental pillar of May’s book. Marxist theory, including Critical Theory and Post-Marxism, is properly addressed on Chapter 2. May attributes the failure of Marxism to its commitment to strict formal and strategic approaches to political thought, addressing the representative issues of Marxism-Leninism, while also criticizing its totalizing response to capitalist oppression. Critical Theory also failed to address the interconnectedness of oppression, instead limiting itself to only analyze different forms of oppression within the capitalist framework. As May puts it:

While Lenin saw capitalism primarily in economic terms, the turn to “cultural capitalism” by the Critical Theorists does not change the analysis of capitalism; it merely spreads it across the entire social space. In that sense, Critical Theory radicalizes Lenin’s thought. Rather than seeing the economic sphere as determinative *for* social relationships, Critical Theory views the economic sphere as the model of social relationships. (26)

Post-Marxist thought however, while still operating within a Marxist framework, closely resembles anarchist theory. Castoriadis’ critiques of Marx (see Castoriadis 1987) are paradigmatic: first, Marx assumed that rates of profit would dwindle, which was not the case; secondly, Marx assumed that workers would allow themselves to be exploited by the *bourgeoisie* to the point of poverty without taking any action to avoid it, which was also not the case, as the rise of syndicates and a stronger social State prevented that outcome; thirdly, and more importantly, Castoriadis reformulates the notion of “alienation” to a lack of a bigger participation in decision-making and production process and not to a lack of a bigger share of the surplus value: “Workers must manage their own affairs, not only their private lives but their workplace and their political lives as well” (42). Nonetheless, Castoriadis’ Post-Marxist analysis remains a strategic one, since it still targets a single culprit for oppression: capitalism. What May tried to prove in his analysis of Marxist theory “is that Marxism, in dealing with successive disappointments, kept reformulating itself in ways that edged ever closer to – but never entirely coincided with – the perspective embraced by anarchism” (18). The failure of Marxism derived directly from its strategic approach. The unfulfillment of its revolutionary predictions, conjointly with its reductionist analysis, paved the way to a different kind of political theory: anarchism.

3. The Blind Spot: Classical Anarchism and the Neglect of Second-Wave Theory

Most discussions involving poststructuralism and anarchism are bound to be approached by philosophers in an entrenched way. Consequently, the lack of a serious and encompassing analysis severely affects the plausibility of the arguments advanced. Unfortunately, the discussions present in this book fail to be an exception to the rule. May’s knowledge of poststructuralism, particularly of French authors such as Lyotard, Deleuze and Foucault, is insightful and unquestionable; however, the same cannot be said about his grasp of anarchism. Anarchism is often treated throughout the book in an often superficial, shallow and, at times, almost simplistic view, as seen in Chapter 3. Although well-intentioned, May’s analysis of anarchism is severely lacking, as it remains almost entirely framed in Classical Anarchism, with large swaths of his analysis dedicated to the likes of Bakunin, Kropotkin and Proudhon, which are, regrettably, only hastily summarized, instead of deeply analyzed and scrutinized. Even worse, May addresses anarchism without offering any substantial analysis to second-wave anarchism, which had already offered answers to some of limitations advanced by May in his analysis of Classical Anarchism. The absence of names such as Guy Debord or Raoul Vaneigem, combined with the (insufficient) focus of May on anarchism overall, affects the legitimacy of his work, considering that the limitations of Classical Anarchism advanced in Chapter 3 had already been studied by post-World War II anarchist theorists. Failure to engage with the sufficiency (or not) of the responses provided by second-wave anarchism is a major methodological flaw for the possibility for a “poststructuralist anarchism”, since it casts a damaging doubt on the validity of the whole project.

Nonetheless, May’s critiques of the ambivalence of Classical Anarchism between strategic and tactical political philosophy remain valid. Anarchism, in contrast with Marxist, rejects any centralization of power, independently of how well-intentioned it may be, and, above all, rejects any sort of representation:

The rejection of centralization in an organization dedicated to producing “the embryo of future human society” is part of the larger, central theme of anarchism: the rejection of representation. (...) To the anarchists, political representation signifies the delegation of power from one group or individual to another, and with that delegation comes the risk of exploitation by the group or individual to whom power has been ceded. (47)

Despite the fact that (classical) anarchists still point the *locus* of power to a single institution (the State), anarchist theory is based on resistance and intervention at the local manifestations of oppression caused by state power. The identification that power manifests itself in different ways, creating multiple instances of oppression, led May to announce anarchism as the “forerunner to current poststructuralist thought” (13), suggesting that poststructuralism can be seen as a “post-anarchist” project. This suggestion might have had some degree of plausibility in it, had anarchist political theory remained attached to its classical roots, which, in any

case, did not. The emergence of second-wave anarchism, most notably the rise of international movements – such as the Situationist International¹ in the 1960s – is enough of a proof that anarchism is not a decadent theory to be studied as a relic from the past: it is still a thriving and relevant project. Contemporary anarchism is still widely subject to academic debate, namely on radical feminist theory and post-left politics. May's condescending and academically deficient approach to anarchism makes his whole discussion of Chapter 3 a fallacy. The only attempt at discussing contemporary anarchism occupies less than four pages, but it is more than enough to demonstrate that some of May's contributions to anarchism had already been made by contemporary anarchists such as David Wieck (1979), who is quoted in a short discussion of his work:

Basic to Marxism is the view that economic power is the key to a liberation of which the power of a party, the power of government, and the power of a specific class are (or are to be) instruments. Basic to anarchism is the opposing view that the abolition of dominion and tyranny depends on their negation, in thought and when possible action, in every form and at every step, from now on, progressively, by every individual and group, in movements of liberation as well as elsewhere, no matter the state of consciousness of entire social classes. (49)

What is essential to note is that second-wave anarchists' rejection of unitary and totalizing explanations, which May criticizes (legitimately) in classical authors, is already present. Consequently, Classical Anarchism cannot be taken as the premise of anarchist discussion since the anarchists themselves rejected, at least partly, the classical authors' analysis. The goal of contemporary anarchism is not just the abolition of the State; it is the abolition of totality, coercion, hierarchical government and power in all its manifestations. Although methodologically deficient, there are still some interesting insights to be extracted from May's comments on anarchism. For him, "the picture of power and struggle that emerges in the anarchist perspective is one of intersecting networks of power rather than of a hierarchy" (51). May, however, argues that anarchism restricts the recognition of a network of power to the prescription of alternatives and not to the analysis of hierarchical structures, as the poststructuralists do. Anarchist theory parallels, to a certain degree, poststructuralist thought, especially in its recognition that "the political character of social space can be seen (...) in terms of intersections of power rather than emanations from a source" (52). Therefore, successful political intervention, in order to be impactful, has to be focused on the key points of intersection.

Regarding the ethical concerns of anarchism, May is not immune to abusive generalizations: "At the core of much of the anarchist project is the assumption, first, that human beings have a nature or essence; and, second, that that essence is good or benign" (63). This dual assumption is, yet again, characteristic of classical anarchist theory, not the contemporary one. Authors such as Colin Ward (1973), whom May himself admits as an exception, share the poststructuralist critique of essentialism, since the resort to an idea of a benign essence is abusively used to justify every resistance to power and "allows anarchists to assume their ethics rather than having to argue for them" (64). In short, Classical Anarchism, having a reductionist analysis based on the oppression of representation (that Marxist theory largely failed to solve) and power – which is wrongly attributed to a single source – is the basis of poststructuralism's contributions to the debate.

4. Poststructuralism, the Micro-Physics of Power and Micropolitics

The discussion of the poststructuralist approach on the issues of power proves to be May's strongest point in his work. Post-structuralism rejects the anarchist assumption that power is always a suppressive force, as advanced at the end of Chapter 3:

Suppose that anarchists had a different view of power, one that saw power not solely as suppressive but also as productive: power not only suppresses actions, events, and people, but creates them as well. In that case, it would be impossible to justify the resistance to all power; one would have to distinguish clearly acceptable creations or effects (as opposed, in the case of the suppressive assumption, to exercises) of power from unacceptable ones. (63)

The focus on the (French) poststructuralist analysis of power provides a redefinition on how power operates on individuals. Rather than outright oppressing individuals by suppressing their wants and desires in a "top-down" mechanism, the works of French poststructuralists such as Deleuze, Lyotard and, especially, Foucault present an alternative conception of power. If power is not enforced from a domineering position and is, instead, arranged in interconnecting networks that mutually reinforce each other, then the whole Marxist and classical anarchist approach to the elimination of injustice caused by power inequality is focused on the wrong targets. May endorses Foucault's four propositions for the operation of power provided in his *History of Sexuality* ([1976] 1978) as the focal point of poststructuralist views on modern power:

(...) (Foucault advances) four "propositions" on modern power: 1) that "it is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of non-egalitarian and mobile relations"; 2) that "relations of power are not in a position of exteriority to other types of relationships"; that 3) "power comes from below; that is, there is no binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled at the root of power relations, and serving as a general matrix"; and 4) that "power relations are both intentional and non-subjective."

This way, if power operates *within* the objects and not *upon* them, the logical conclusion is that power does not always act as a suppressive force; it can also act as a creative force, giving rise not only to what is to be resisted but also to the resistance and insurrectionary practices which are used as the *praxis* against oppression. It is this specific point that, for May, makes tactical political philosophy a necessity: "if power creates its own resistance, then the liberation from specific forms of power must take account of the kind of resistance that is being engaged in, on pain of repeating that which one is trying to escape" (73). Nonetheless, May is not immune to the anarchist critique that power – either creative or suppressive – is still power, in the sense that it still uses force and coercion to restrict an individual's way of thinking and behaving, inevitably casting doubts on the true emancipatory potential of poststructuralist anarchism.

¹ While the Situationist International explicitly distanced itself from classical anarchism – frequently critiquing it as a residual bourgeois ideology – their emphasis on the "revolution of everyday life," the critique of the spectacle and the total rejection of political representation fundamentally reshaped post-1968 radical theory. Consequently, contemporary post-left and post-anarchist theorists widely recognize the Situationist International as a crucial tactical bridge between *avant-garde* Marxism and modern anarchist praxis. See Ford (2005).

French poststructuralism, most notably Michel Foucault's works, draws on the view that subjects are constituted *in lieu* of constituting. May, in accordance with Foucault, argues that every power "is a historical phenomenon dependent upon the practices from which it emerged and which sustain it, (and) can be altered or abolished by new practices" (79). This notion is of particular relevance because it suggests that power is exercised not only vertically (when it is suppressive), but also horizontally (when it is creative). The poststructuralist project for emancipation deems that the creative purposes of power are necessary in order to resist the suppressive purposes of power. The difference between poststructuralist anarchism and orthodox, classic anarchism is the rejection of its strategic basis: the benign essence of the human being and the ever-present suppressive nature of power.

In establishing his "Steps Toward a Poststructuralist Anarchism", May provides a number of arguments to prove that resistance to oppression should be multi-dimensional. Power, being inescapable, must be used in order to emancipate the individual. Lyotard's approach to knowledge in *The Postmodern Condition* ([1979] 1984) supports the claim of the creative potential of power, as it shows how knowledge can be used to establish and legitimize forms of oppression:

(...) the connivance of capitalism and science in an attempt to substitute scientific knowledge for other forms of narrative knowledge raises the question of the legitimation of science, a question that can only be answered through the narrative knowledge scientific practice often seems to replace. (88)

The power of scientific knowledge does not emanate from a central source of power. It is, above all, a disseminated narrative that is tacitly accepted by the subjects of power. Eliminating its center, for example, the State, will hardly affect the way knowledge subverts the individual's behavior. Poststructuralism recognizes the positivity of power and the failure of the essentialist project, giving birth to genealogy as an analysis technique, which May regards as "the anarchist method par excellence" (90). Genealogy traces the emergence of objects, regardless of its form. It is important to take notice that genealogy does not look for a unitary origin but, instead, tries to ascertain how a particular intersection of power leads to a particular practice. This technique is of the utmost importance, since it deconstructs the assumption that knowledge is independent of political considerations. The break with scientific "neutrality" is, perhaps, the most impactful contribution of poststructuralism, considering that the acquiescence of this discourse inhibited full emancipation. The realization that individuals are oppressed even in the creation of their own resistance to oppression is the first step to the possibility of creating new emancipatory mechanisms that are currently out of reach of traditional emancipatory theories:

(...) genealogy recognizes itself to be part of the tension articulated at the outset of the present essay between the *is* and the *ought* pole of political philosophy. Genealogy recognizes that its knowledge is value-laden and contextually situated, just as its values are inseparable from the context in which they emerge: a context that includes a certain epistemological arrangement, what Foucault has called a "regime of truth." (94)

Poststructuralist theory, by analyzing the specific situations where power is enforced, while tracing its origins, provides the tools for a micropolitical intervention, instead of a macropolitical one. It is characterized by a pure anti-representational nature and argues for the inseparability between theory and practice: "Micropolitical theory, like traditional anarchist theory, seeks to stand alongside micropolitical practice, not to represent it to itself. Theory does not exist outside of practice; it, too, is a practice" (96). The rejection of macropolitics is based on the consideration that all practices of macropolitical entities involve power and practices that, more often than not, have its origins in local practices. When those entities emerge, local practices do not lose their relevance in the maintenance of the macropolitical practices. If the micropolitical originates the macropolitical, changes aimed strictly at the "macro" level will not lead to any substantial alteration of the practices at the "micro" level; consequently, a form of oppression is simply substituted by a similar form of oppression.

Foucault's analysis in *Discipline and Punish* ([1975] 1995) supports these claims. The transformation of punitive practices in the last centuries, with the progressive abandonment of highly brutal and arbitrary forms of punishment – such as torture –, and its gradual substitution by a more discipline-based form of punishment did little to alter the practices at the micropolitical level. The aim of punishment – maintaining normality – is still present in disciplinary punishment, albeit in a more covertly way. As May notes, "discipline could now be applied not only to those who had broken the law, but to anyone who was not optimally normal—in other words, to everyone" (102). However, it is important to take note that French poststructuralists do not belittle the impacts that the macropolitical can have on local practices; they only question the capacity to create emancipatory local practices out of macropolitical changes. Deleuze's admission of the "overcoding" capacity of the State (see Deleuze and Guattari 1987) shows that macropolitical impacts are undeniable: "The state is not the only operator of overcoding, but it is the operator that makes the operation stick" (107). Nonetheless, the State depends on the micropolitical to sustain itself. The state-form (and its functioning) depends on practices and institutions that have specific practices that maintain the functionality of the State as a whole.

5. Anti-Representational Ethics and the Promotion of Difference

The last part of the book is dedicated to May's answers to critiques of the lack of ethical principles and coherence of poststructuralism. For him, poststructuralism is based on two ethical principles. The first one, anti-representationalism, revolves around the illegitimacy of representation. May argues that this principle is double-faced:

First, the power to represent people to themselves is oppressive in itself. Practices of telling people who they are and what they want erect a barrier between them and who (or what) they can create themselves to be. (...) Second, representing people to themselves helps to reinforce other oppressive social relationships. (131)

For May, some practices are acceptable, others are not; that is not the focus of poststructuralist ethics. Representation, under the form of "normalization", is the real target. Normalization is a practice that defines what is normal in a given group or society and an attempt to enforce that norm upon the individual. In short, normalization is more than a mere usurpation of representation; its main goal is to actively provide normative models, shaping the individual and acting in direct contrast with emancipatory practices. This is the main critique of poststructuralism to the strategic political philosophy present in Marxist and Classical Anarchism, since the representation mechanism present in both groups of theories implies blind obedience and discouragement of deviance. The interests of the oppressed are seen as an immutable phenomenon and must always be followed, whether the oppressed actually feels

represented or not. As May suggests throughout his book, even the simple act of “feeling” represented is a normalization of wants and interests. Strategic political intervention is destined to fail as long as its ethical principles are based on a generalization of the interests of individuals that are oppressed in very different ways. A white male proletarian is victim of a different type of oppression than an ethnic-minority female proletarian. Classical “one-size-fits-all” approaches to emancipation refuse to particularize struggles in favor of a homogenous struggle against a common enemy, who, nonetheless, oppresses in widely different ways.

The second ethical principle of poststructuralism is precisely this promotion of difference in local practices. May argues that “alternative practices, all things being equal, ought to be allowed to flourish and even to be promoted” (133). The project of political action, for May, is not necessarily one where there is total liberation from operation, but one where the local spaces of situated freedom are expanded. The stronger the influence of the power networks over the individual is, the more he or she is oppressed. Poststructuralism, then, aims to provide a *locus* for alternative practices, bringing to light subjugated discourses, as it gives more weight to specific analyses and interventions than formal and strategic political philosophy. While, at first sight, this might look like a very narrow approach to ethics, May still succeeds in providing an answer to the ethical coherence of his work; after all, every ethical discourse operates under a universalization mechanism. As he argues: “Were ethics to be situation-specific, there would be no such thing as ethics, because there would be no generalization.” (152). This means that, as long as poststructuralism respects its two principles – anti-representationalism and the promotion of difference – it will be able to maintain its coherence and deflationist approach to what is true. More than emancipating the individual, the tactical political philosophy presented by poststructuralism displays the actual conditions of oppression; it does not directly emancipate, but it gives the tools for emancipation.

6. Conclusion

In short, calling Todd May’s poststructuralist analysis an “anarchist” project seems, at the very least, far-fetched. The question “When is the exercise of power legitimate, and when is it not?” (61) is the central point of his work. The answer, according to anarchist theory is quite straight-forward: all relationships of power are illegitimate and, therefore, must be abolished. Anarchism proposes a revolutionary project of rupture with the oppressive center of power. Independently of the efficacy of the anarchist project, it stands in direct opposition with the poststructuralist perspective, which seems to lean on a reformist view based on a lessening of oppressing practices. On the one hand, anarchism aims at the destruction of the *totality* of power relations; on the other hand, May suggests that creative power can be used to destroy oppressive power. These are not compatible approaches. As such, May fails to provide any substantial arguments to label the poststructuralist project as an “anarchist” one.

Despite failing to prove his thesis that poststructuralism is based on anarchist principles, Todd May’s *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism* provides an engaging critique of Marxism, as well as an in-depth analysis on how Critical Theory, Post-Marxism and Classical Anarchism failed to answer to most criticisms to orthodox Marxism. Poststructuralism is presented in a remarkable way – especially in its French manifestation – as it is able to provide an in-depth inquiry into the politics of poststructuralism thought. It is only unfortunate that May inadequately tries to prove his thesis by providing the wrong type of analysis; the absence of a critical analysis to second-wave anarchism debilitates what otherwise would have been a masterful fresh insight to the role of poststructuralism in anarchist literature.

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