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Perspectives On Anarchist Theory

INSTITUTE FOR ANARCHIST STUDIES

Poststructuralist Anarchism An Interview with Todd May

As a political philosophy, anarchism is concerned with the transformation of society; however, anarchism is often neglected by major political and philosophical trends. In an attempt to situate anarchism within contemporary philosophical thought as well as think critically about anarchism, Todd May has created what he calls poststructuralist anarchism. By grafting French poststructuralist thought onto anarchism, May offers a new political philosophy with which to analyze our world. I conducted an interview with Todd May via email in October 2000.

~ Rebecca DeWitt

*P*oststructuralist Anarchism is the combination of anarchism and poststructuralist philosophy (the work of Foucault, Lyotard and Deleuze). What is essential to both these political philosophies that makes it possible to combine

them?

What I see as the essential link between anarchism and the poststructuralism of Lyotard, Deleuze, and especially Foucault, is the denial that there is some central hinge about which political change could or should revolve. For Marx, political change was a matter of seizing the means of production; for liberals, it lies in regulating the state. What anarchists deny (at least in parts of their writings, the parts which I'm trying to draw out) is that there is a single Archimedean point for change. Inasmuch as power is everywhere, the need for political reflection and critique is also everywhere. Not only at the level of the state or the economy, but also at the level of sexuality, race, psychology, teaching, etc. etc.

*I*s there anything left of anarchism?

I believe there is. If I'm right in my approach, what anarchism provides to poststructuralism is a larger framework within which to situate its specific analyses. The framework is a different one, to be sure, from the traditional anarchist framework. It is not unchanged by poststructuralism. But the new framework I have tried to articulate would be news to most poststructuralists, who resist the idea of a larger framework altogether.

*H*ow do we reconcile anarchism, which often relies on politically unifying principles (such as anti-capitalist/statist stances), with poststructuralist thought, which sees power as an interconnected network rather than a system to be opposed? Regarding the idea of totalizing systems, it is surely the

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Reclaim the Cities: From Protest to Popular Power

"Direct action gets the goods," proclaimed the Industrial Workers of the World nearly a century ago. And in the short time since Seattle, this has certainly proven to be the case. Indeed, "the goods" reaped by the new direct action movement here in North America have included creating doubt as to the scope and nature of globalization, shedding light on the nearly unknown workings of international trade and finance bodies, and making

anarchism and anticapitalism almost household words. As if that weren't enough, we find ourselves on the streets of twenty-first-century metropolises demonstrating our power to resist in a way that models the good society we envision: a truly democratic one.

But is this really what democracy looks like?

The impulse to "reclaim the

streets" is an understandable one. When industrial capitalism first started to emerge in the early nineteenth century, its machinations were relatively visible. Take, for instance, the enclosures. Pasture lands that had been used in common for centuries to provide villages with their very sustenance were systematically fenced off — enclosed — in order to graze sheep, whose wool was

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Perspectives on Anarchist Theory

Fall 2000, Vol. 4, No. 2

Newsletter of the Institute
for Anarchist Studies

Editor:
Rebecca DeWitt

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IAS Board of Directors:
Paula Emery, John Petrovato,
Dan Chodorkoff,
Cindy Milstein, Maura Dillon,
Paul Glavin, Chuck Morse

General Director:
Rebecca DeWitt

P.O. Box 1664
Peter Stuyvesant Station
New York, NY 10009 – USA

Phone: 718-349-6367
E-mail: ias@newyorknet.net
Web: <http://flag.blackened.net/ias/Default.htm>

The LAS is a nonprofit,
tax-exempt organization.

IAS Update

This fall sees the IAS expand funding opportunities, say goodbye to a board member and find a new home on the internet, as well as continue with our general activities.

As a result of our June 2000 board meeting we decided to sponsor a writing contest in addition to our usual grant awards. We wanted some way to connect more directly with contemporary political developments and offer financial support to a wider variety of people. While our grants are meant for more substantial projects, we decided to offer \$1000 for a short essay focusing on anarchist perspectives on the "new social movement" we see developing all around us. See page three for more details. The winning essay will be published in the newsletter as well as on our website.

Michelle Matisons, after five years as a board member, is moving on. She has relocated to the San Francisco Bay area where she has just successfully completed a Ph.D. in Women's Studies. Her dissertation, "Systems, Standpoints, and Subjects: Marxist Legacies in U.S. Feminist Theories" looks at the ways in which Marxism has influenced US feminism – for better or for worse. From the start, Michelle committed herself to ensuring the success of the IAS and we have all enjoyed working with her.

The IAS website has moved to a new location, <http://flag.blackened.net/ias>. This anarchist site has generously offered to host the IAS and we are happy to be in the company of friends. Our email address stays the same for the time being and we'll maintain a redirect page on our old website account.

A new page on the website detailing how and where to find completed IAS projects will be of interest to everyone. Future pages in the works include advice on writing and publishing for the radical writer.

This year we gave out our first grant to a fiction project. For quite some time, we have been committed to funding the "written word" and we are excited to have given a grant for a play about an Irish anarchist. We also gave a grant to a previous grant recipient who will expand upon his original work on

anarchism and South Africa to include issues such as Black Nationalism. See page three for more details.

Cindy Milstein and John Petrovato organized a great anarchist conference at the end of August. It was a pleasure to attend an anarchist conference where a high level of thought was present in both the presentations and inevitably lively lunch and dinner conversations. Five board members gave presentations to varying degrees, along with a wide variety of activists and intellectuals.

Chuck Morse's interview with Janet Biehl (Spring 1998) has been translated into two more languages, German and Japanese – that makes six different translations so far. My article on Seattle (Spring 2000) was quoted in a London based Portuguese language newspaper and will also be reprinted, in a revised state, in the upcoming issue of Social Anarchism.

Our fundraising campaign is going quite well although we still need \$6000 in donations to meet our goal. So far, we have received \$14,000 in donations and we thank everyone – old and new supporters – for their generosity. We recently received a fabulous donation from Aigis Press of three new titles, which will compliment our books for donors. These include *Since Predator Came: Notes From The Struggle For American Indian Liberation* by Ward Churchill; *From State to Community: Rethinking South Korean Modernization* by Seung-joon Ahn; and *One Size Does Not Fit All* by Beverly Naidus. See the booklist insert for all the wonderful books from Raven Used Books you can choose from and support the IAS.

~ Rebecca DeWitt

The IAS website has moved!

Our new address is

<http://flag.blackened.net/ias>

Grants awarded • Entire collection of newsletters • Application materials • Anarchism links

Grant Awards

The LAS Board of Directors was pleased to award grants to the following individuals in June 2000:

\$1000 to Kevin Doyle for "Orange Fire", a three act theater play about the life, beliefs and struggles of Irish activist Captain Jack White (1879-1946), who strongly identified as an anarchist. White's life and anarchist beliefs have all but been obliterated due to the destruction of his memoirs and papers by his family (White came from a privileged Protestant family loyal to the British monarchy) and the fact that, as a revolutionary, he has been "written out" of the history books. In order to provide a framework with which activists can challenge sectarian divisions in Ireland, this play aims to situate White within Irish revolutionary history as well as anarchism and draws on the destruction of White's papers as a metaphor for the repressive mentality of a sectarian soci-

ety. Kevin Doyle is an award winning short story writer and political activist. He is a founding member of the Workers Solidarity Movement, an anarchist organization in Ireland.

\$1000 to Lucien van der Walt for "Anarchism and Revolutionary Syndicalism in South Africa, 1904-1921", which expands upon a project previously funded by the LAS. This new work will deal with the influence of anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism on broader social movements in the same period. The specific focus is on the impact of libertarian socialist ideas on trade unions and Black Nationalism. This project builds upon the original research into the influence of anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism on revolutionary groups in South Africa. Lucien van der Walt is a student, teacher and activist in South Africa. His work focuses on trade union activity in Africa and he has written

extensively on historical and contemporary labor politics. ~

If you are interested in applying for a grant, please send a SASE to the LAS at P.O. Box 1664, Peter Stuyvesant Station, New York, NY 10009 – USA; or print an application from our website, <http://flag.blackened.net/ias>.

Writing Prize

The LAS is offering a \$1000 award for an essay that advances anarchist perspectives on the "new social movements" represented by recent international anti-globalization protests. Essays should address this movement in a fashion that links theory to practice in order to contribute to the emergence of new anarchist praxis, theory informed by practice. Submissions should be between 3000 and 10,000 words. Written work already funded by the LAS will not be considered. The winning essay will receive \$1000 and excerpts will be published in the IAS newsletter.

Deadline for submissions is
January 1, 2001.

Grant Updates

C.W. Brown completed *Vanguards of the Crusaders; The American Radical Right, Liberal Ideology, and the New World Order* and presented it in August in Vermont during the anarchist conference "Critical Anarchism: Remaking the Tradition." He was awarded \$800 in June 1997.

Allan Antliff's book, *The Culture of Revolt: Art and Anarchy in America*, went through final editing at the University of Chicago Press. "Cosmic Modernism: Elie Nadelman, Adolf Wolff, and the Materialist Aesthetics of John Weichsel", an article based on material from his book, can be found in the March 1999 issue of *Archives of American Art History*, magazine of the Smithsonian. He was awarded \$1000 in January 1997.

Matt Hern and Stuart Chalk's book, *Architecture of Isolation* is available soon from Broadview Press, Ontario. Excerpts published in *Democracy & Nature*, Vol. 6, No. 1. They were awarded \$1200 in January 1998.

Sam Mbah completed a draft of his manuscript, *Military Dictatorship and The State of Africa*. He hopes to finish the book and begin the publishing process this fall. He was awarded \$2000 in January 1999.

Frank Adams completed a draft of his essay "Work Ownership & Work Management: One Anarchist's Perspective" and aims to complete the essay by spring 2001. He was awarded \$500 in June 1997.

Mike Staudenmaier's piece *Towards a New Anarchist Theory of Nationalism* is shaping up with research on theories of nationalism in Bakunin, Landauer, and Rocker; theories on the nature and character of nations and states; and contemporary anarchist responses to nationalisms, including the IWW as anti-nationalist and the Anarchist Black Cross Federation as pro-nationalist. A version of this project will be published

in issue #3 of *Arsenal: A Magazine of Anarchist Strategy and Culture* (Winter 2001). He was awarded \$1500 in January 2000.

Fernando López continues research on, *The FACA and the Anarchist Movement in Argentina*. He has completed three chapters and is now writing about anarchist activities in the Devoto prison during 1931. He has also collaborated with university students to research material on the "disappeared comrades" of the late 70's. He was awarded \$2200 in June 1999.

Joe Lowndes is still working on his essay "Anarchism and the Rise of Right-wing Anti-Statism", focusing on the role of white southern activists and intellectuals in the 1940s and 1950s in creating the racist statist discourse prevalent on the right today. An article will be produced in the near future. He was awarded \$1000 in June 1998. ~

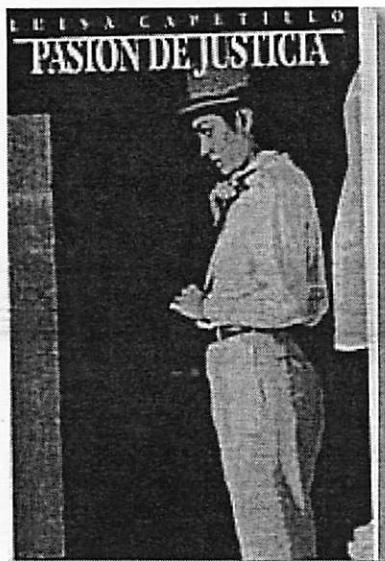
What's Happening: Books and Events

Zapatismo!

The Zapatista experience is rich in lessons for anyone working to think through a radical politics for today. John Ross's forthcoming *The War Against Oblivion: Zapatista Chronicles 1994-2000* adds another volume to the already abundant literature on the Zapatistas' accomplishments and dilemmas (Common Courage Press, December 2000, 320 pages). This book analyzes the evolution of the Zapatistas and their conflict with the Mexican state from their 1994 uprising to Mexico's recent presidential elections. Some of the theoretical background of Zapatista work can be found in *Our Word Is Our Weapon: Selected Writings of Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos* (Seven Stories Press, December 2000, 416 pages). This collection is divided into three sections: the first contains Marcos' political essays and shows the evolution of Zapatismo as a whole; the second presents Marcos' philosophical queries, personal reflections, and humorous recollections on his first days as a guerrilla, as well as letters to other writers; and the final section features short stories, folk tales, and mythic pieces for which he has become famous.

Understanding is Half the Battle

Noam Chomsky tackles some of the international contradictions that help produce movements such as the Zapatistas. In his *Rogue States: The Rule of Force in World Affairs* Chomsky criticizes the world's superpowers for committing indefensible actions in the name of democracy and human rights. The United States and its allies are rebuked for violations of international law, violations that make them the real "rogue states" in the world today. He challenges the legal and humanitarian arguments in favor of NATO's war in the Balkans, turns his attention toward U.S. involvement in the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and Central America, and reveals the United States' increasingly open dismissal of the United Nations and international law (South End

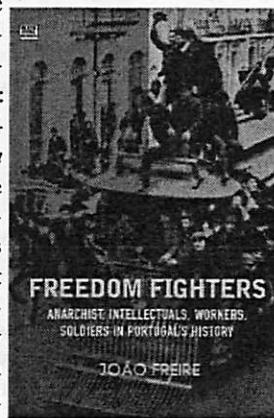


Luisa Capetillo

Press, August 2000, 164 pages). Readers may also wish to consult Robert Burbach's *Globalization And Postmodern Politics: From Zapatistas To High Tech Robber Barons* (Pluto Press, December 2000, 192 pages). This book develops a critical analysis of global capitalism and places contemporary opposition movements, such as the Zapatistas and the protest movements that laid siege to last year's WTO meeting in Seattle in this context.

Lost Anarchist Struggles

While European anti-authoritarian movements are relatively well documented, much has still to be told. The history of anarchism in Portugal is the subject of Joao Freire's new book *Freedom Fighters: Anarchist Intellectuals, Workers, and Soldiers in Portugal's History* (Black Rose Books, 200 pages, September 2000). This book traces the Portuguese anarchist movement from the beginning of the twentieth century to the present, touching on the Spanish Civil War, World War II, the Salazar dictatorship, and the "carnation revolution" in 1974. A still broader picture of European radical-



ism is possible thanks to several new publications from London's Kate Sharpley Library. *Louis Lecoin: An Anarchist Life* (33 pages, large format) traces the biography of a French anarchist whose political activity spanned more than a half-century, ending with his death 1971. They have also released a treatment of a more contemporary movement: *The Couriers are Revolting: The Despatch Industry Workers Union, 1989-92* (24 pages). Readers will also want to pick up Chris Mosey's *Car Wars: Battles on the Road to Nowhere* for a look at the anarchist-influenced anti-roads movement in the UK (Vision Paperbacks, 222 pages, March 2000). This book traces the history of opposition to the automobile and the explosion of these sentiments in the UK during the first half of the 1990's. Special attention is paid to the Reclaim the Streets group.

Latin-American Feminism

If European radicalism has not been fully documented, then the history of Latin American anarchism has hardly been touched. Norma Valle Ferrer's *The Story of Luisa Capetillo: a Pioneer Puerto Rican Feminist* will make a contribution to the rectification of this problem (Peter Lang Publishing, December 2000). Luisa Capetillo (1879-1922) was one of the leading figures of Puerto Rico's early labor movement, a movement in which libertarian socialism was an important – if not the most important – tendency. Capetillo, a feminist, anarchist, labor organizer, and novelist, is often remembered as the first woman to wear pants in public in Puerto Rico and many consider her book, *Mi opinión sobre las Libertades, Derechos y Deberes de la Mujer* (trans: *My Opinion on the Liberties, Riches and Duties of the Woman*) the first Puerto Rican feminist work. Valle Ferrer's biography will be a principal source for biographical data on this major political figure.

F oreign Language Resource

If anarchism has always been international, there is no doubt that it has strong roots in Russia, especially in the life and work of the Russian Anarchist, Mikhail Bakunin. Researchers will no longer have to travel to archives around the world to find his writings thanks to Amsterdam's Institute for Social History. This September the Institute will present Mikhail Bakunin's *Oeuvres Complètes*, a searchable CD-ROM containing all known texts written by Bakunin in Russian and, whenever applicable, French translation. Spanish readers will be able to enjoy an expanded view of the anarchist tradition thanks to the recent translation of Murray Bookchin's *Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy*. This work is the most comprehensive statement of an anti-authoritarian vision and politics since Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid* (*La Ecología de la Libertad: el Surgimiento y la Disolución de la Jerarquía*, translation by Marcelo Gabriel Burello. Nossa y Jara and Colectivo Los Arenalejo, 1999, 509 pages).

M odernist Roots

Anarchism has provided a common framework for some of the most important innovations in art and politics. In *Mosaic Modernism: Anarchism, Pragmatism, Culture*, David Kadlec examines the anarchist and pragmatist origins of modernism as a literary/cultural phenomenon. Treating a wide range of historical sources and materials, many of them previously unpublished, Kadlec argues that German, French, and British anarchists spurred the formal experiments of leading modernists, thus offering a dramatically new account of modernism's political genesis and the mosaic, improvisational tendencies of modern literature (Johns Hopkins University Press, October 2000, 312 pages). Erich Mühsam, an important anarchist thinker and one of the leading artists in the tradition, will become more familiar to English readers thanks to the translation of his



Luce Fabbri

play *Thunderation: Folk Play With Song and Dance* (Bucknell University Press, September 2000). This is Mühsam's last play, written before he died at the hands of the Nazis in 1934.

A ctivist Resources

Two new books will help activists develop a strategy for our times. *Globalization from Below: The Power of Solidarity* by Jeremy Brecher, Tim Costello, and Brendan Smith (South End, October 2000, 128 pages) attempts to advance a strategy for building the movement against globalization. A revised edition of Brian Burch's *Resources for Radicals*, an annotated bibliography of print resources for those involved in movements for social transformation, is now available. This book contains approximately 800 entries and touches on issues such as meeting facilitation, community gardening, civil disobedience, union organizing, among many other topics (September, 2000, Toronto Action for Social Change).

W elcome Back

After a long hiatus, *Kick It Over* magazine has begun publishing regularly again. Individual subscriptions to this attractive, high quality "social anarchist anti-authoritarian quarterly" are available for \$14.50 (in US funds). Institutional subscriptions are \$20. For more information write to Kick It Over, P.O. Box

1836, Guelph, Ontario, Canada, N1H 7A1 or e-mail kio@tao.ca.

P resenting the Past

Anyone living near or passing through Ann Arbor will want to visit the exhibit "Jo Labadie and His Gift to Michigan: A Legacy for the Masses," which will be on display from September 12th to November 22nd at the Labadie Collection at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. This exhibition will examine the life of this Detroit anarchist and influential labor activist.

L uce Fabbri, 1908-2000

Sadly it is necessary to note the death of Luce Fabbri, a life-long anarchist thinker and activist (and daughter of the famed Italian anarchist Luigi Fabbri). Luce died of a heart attack on August 19th in Montevideo, Uruguay at the age of 92. Her latest book was *La Libertad entre la Historia y la Utopía: Tres Ensayos y Otros Textos del Siglo XX* (trans: *Freedom in History and Utopia; Three Essays and Other Texts of the 20th Century* (REA, 1998, 145 pages). Her life will be documented in a forthcoming biography by Margareth Rago. She will be greatly missed by her friends and comrades in Uruguay and around the world.

Contacts and Addresses

Common Courage Press
www.commoncouragepress.com

Toronto Action for Social Change
P.O. Box 73620, 509 St. Clair Ave. West
Toronto, ON M6C 1C0
(416) 651-5800; e-mail: burch@web.net

Institute for Social History
<http://www.iisg.nl/>

Peter Lang Publishing
<http://www.peterlang.com/>

Seven Stories Press
www.sevenstories.com

Poststructuralist Anarchism: Interview with Todd May

Continued from page 1

case that much of anarchism, both in practice and in theory, targets capitalism and the state. My book is a suggestion that we not look in those two places so as to blind ourselves about the ubiquity of power's operation. If capitalism and the state were the sole culprits, then eliminating them would by itself open us up to a utopian society. But we ought to be leery of such simple solutions. One of the lessons of the struggles against racism, misogyny, prejudice against gays and lesbians, etc. is that power and oppression are not reducible to a single site or a single operation. We need to understand power as it operates not only at the level of the state and capitalism, but in the practices through which we conduct our lives.

In your book, political philosophy is cast in terms of the articulation of "the discordance between the world as it exists and the world as it is envisioned."

"political philosophy is motivated by a discordance between how people think the world should be and how they find it."

n your book, political philosophy is cast in terms of the articulation of "the discordance between the world as it exists and the world as it is envisioned." When the discordance is no longer present, that particular political philosophy becomes obsolete, whether it occurs because the world has changed or because the goals have been realized. You give the example of the communist revolution where, once the goals of the revolution were reached, the political philosophy that described such a change becomes obsolete and therefore a new political philosophy was needed in order to advance. Is political philosophy a process where we are constantly remaking our view of the world and what we want?

The idea I'm trying to press early in the book is that political philosophy is motivated by a discordance between how people think the world should be and how they find it. Why think about political philosophy unless there is a problem that needs to be addressed? And that problem, for political philosophy, is that the world is distant from how one thinks it should be. Whether political philosophy is a constant process is something

I'm not sure how to answer. I don't see any reason in principle why it should be, although it may turn out to be. The question of whether political philosophy is a process of constantly remaking ourselves is tied to the question of what kinds of nature human beings have and what kinds of environments they find themselves in. Since elsewhere in the book I deny that there is anything interesting to say about human nature, it all comes down to environment. But who knows how environments will change, and what kinds of questions they will raise for us?

For poststructuralist anarchism, power is both creative and destructive. In contrast, anarchism natural justification of its own existence - that humans are essentially good and it is the institutions of power that are bad therefore we need to get rid of them - characterizes all power as bad. How does the anarchist concept of power change with the addition of poststructuralism?

While [anarchists] have a two-part distinction: power (bad) vs. human nature (good), I have a four-part one: power as creative/power as repressive and good/bad. I do not take creative power as necessarily good, nor repressive power as necessarily bad. It all depends on what is being created or repressed. The ethical evaluation is independent of which kind of power it is. That's why it's so important for there to be clarity on one's ethical vision – a point which too many poststructuralist thinkers neglect. But one does not solve the ethical problem by positing a good human nature and then saying that it should be allowed to flourish. There is too much evidence against the idea of an essentially good (or essentially bad) human nature for that claim to be made. One cannot rest one's ethical judgments on human nature, but instead must develop the socially given ethical networks within which our lives unfold.

You state that we "must abandon [for the most part] the idea of a clear demarcation to be made between political philosophy and political programs...as one moves away from

analysis and toward suggestions for intervention, one passes from philosophy to programmatic." Most political philosophies seem incapable of passing into programmatic and then back again. The tension between the world as it exists and what we envision is most often destroyed by consolidation of power by one idea or political party. Anarchism advocates a direct democracy or federalism to ensure that this doesn't happen but is the life of a political philosophy capable surviving programmatic?

Bear in mind that the anarchism I'm trying to draw out of the tradition would not see direct democracy as the answer to all political problems (otherwise, anarchism would be another strategic political philosophy). That said, your question still remains, since one can wonder what happens to political philosophy when a programmatic is carried out. Certainly, one thing would remain of the view I tried to develop: the idea that we need always to be investigating the power relationships that arise in various practices and to give them proper ethical evaluation; that is to say, to ask whether they are acceptable or not. On the view I'm defending, since we never know in advance how power works, we need always to keep investigating its operation, in order to see where it's leading and what it's creating; and we need always to ask the ethical question of whether we find that acceptable.

What job is it to construct the programmatic?

As far as who is to construct the program, it is certainly not to be philosophers. (Goodness gracious, banish the thought.) This idea is, I hope, no longer taken seriously, even by philosophers. The only response as to who IS to construct the program, or at least have input into its construction, is that it is those who are affected by the current situation and the proposed changes. Now that may be another way of saying "the people," but it does limit things somewhat. For instance, I will have little to say about how gays and lesbians should be treated in society (e.g. should they be admitted into the category of the marriageable or should they challenge mar-

riage itself?) That, it seems to me, is up to them. My role is to support them in their choices.

*T*he anarchist concept of power is characterized as one which "conglomerates at certain points and is reinforced by [power] along certain lines", and therefore can be amenable to the idea of reform because certain reforms at certain points could result in revolution. Is there a place for revolution in poststructuralist anarchism?

The term "revolution" strikes me as a loaded one. Sometimes it seems to mean that there is an overturning of the key point of power in a society. When used in that way, the term "revolution" seems to imply a strategic political philosophy, so I think it is better avoided. When things change enough as a result of political intervention, then we have a revolution. Thus, the distinction between reform and revolution should not be the

"we never know in advance how power works, we need always to keep investigating its operation, in order to see where it's leading and what it's creating"

a mark of one's radicalism, and an unconsidered way of marking out one's distinction from liberalism. As such, it hides the question, which we should be asking: what needs to be changed and how does it need to be changed? When we ask that more concrete question (yes, a philosopher suggesting that a certain jargon is hiding our ability to see the concrete), then we're on the right track. The question of is it revolution or just reform drops away.

What is the World Trade Organization to poststructuralist anarchism? The WTO seems to be one of those organizations where power conglomerates, where a variety of practices collude to

create an oppressive power arrangement. I think we mistake many supporters of the WTO if we describe them in terms of a conspiracy theory. My suspicion is that most of them sincerely believe they are doing good things, even though they're not. How to explain this? It seems to me that we need to look at the practices they're engaged in and the effects of those practices on others, and to recognize that there are a whole series of deleterious effects that supporters of the WTO have failed to recognize. That, it seems to me, would be a poststructuralist anarchist take on the WTO...As an activist, I find myself in accordance with the recent demonstrations intended to eliminate the WTO and related oppressive institutions and to abolish loan paybacks from Third World countries. Of course, there's a lot more, but philosophy, while it interacts with the programmatic, does not, it seems to me, have as a role the construction of the programmatic

*A*s far as action is concerned, you offer suggestions of how poststructuralist anarchism can be acted upon. These include: experimentation, situated freedom, valorization of subjugated discourses, and the intellectual as a participant in theoretical practice rather than a leader. Can you tell me how you and other politically active people can practice these guidelines?

It is difficult to practice much of any politics in South Carolina. Just to point in the general direction of how I live this stuff, it concerns my attitude toward gays and lesbians (I was faculty advisor for the gay/lesbian group for six or seven years); my teaching (I try to reject the idea of a given human nature in my courses, I experiment with course ideas, I include neglected works, often with a political spin, in my syllabi, I often situate the problems we face in the context I've developed in the book); and my parenting (trying to see the effects of power relative to my children's lives and attitudes, and offering alternatives to them) ... If I were to approach the question from the standpoint, say, of someone living in an urban area in the U.S. I

Biography

Todd May grew up in NYC and has been more or less politically active since the 1960's. He continues to be inspired by the hope generated in the 1960's. Unlike many others of his generation, May has not turned to stock options and pension plans and instead strives for a better society by maintaining "the open and continuous response to oppression wherever one finds it." During the 1980's he became involved in the divestment and anti-nuclear movements and since then has worked on gay and lesbian rights, anti-racism and, especially, Palestinian rights. As an intellectual, May paraphrases Foucault to describe himself: "I write what I believe to be right, and let the bureaucrats sort out my papers." He counts among his influences Abbie Hoffman, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Saul Alinsky, Rosa Parks, and Noam Chomsky. Todd May is an Associate Professor of Philosophy at Clemson University in South Carolina.

Selected Works

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Between Genealogy and Epistemology : Psychology, Politics, and Knowledge in The Thought of Michel Foucault. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993.

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Reclaim the Streets: From Protest to Popular Power

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needed for the burgeoning textile industry. Communal life was briskly thrust aside in favor of privatization, forcing people into harsh factories and crowded cities.

Advanced capitalism, as it pushes past the fetters of even nation-states in its insatiable quest for growth, encloses life in a much more expansive yet generally invisible way: fences are replaced by consumer culture. We are raised in an almost totally commodified world where nothing comes for free, even futile attempts to remove oneself from the market economy. This commodification seeps into not only what we eat, wear, or do for fun but also into our language, relationships, and even our very biology and minds. We have lost not only our communities and public spaces but control over our own lives; we have lost the ability to define ourselves outside capitalism's grip, and thus genuine meaning itself begins to dissolve.

"We're not putting off the good society until some distant future but are attempting to carve out room for it in the here and now"

mal of public, noncommodified spheres has been taken from us. Yet in the end, it is simply a frantic cry from our cage. We have become so confined, so thoroughly damaged, by capitalism as well as state control that crumbs appear to make a nourishing meal.

Temporarily closing off the streets during direct actions does provide momentary spaces in which to practice democratic process, and even offers a sense of empowerment, but such events leave power for power's sake, like the very pavement beneath our feet, unchanged. Only when the serial protest mode is escalated into a struggle for popular or horizontal power can we create cracks in



Refuse & Resist! Youth Charge in Philly, July 30 at Unity 2000. Photo from Independent Media Center - Philadelphia

the figurative concrete, thereby opening up ways to challenge capitalism, nation-states, and other systems of domination.

This is not to denigrate the direct action movement in the United States and elsewhere; just the opposite. Besides a long overdue and necessary critique of numerous institutions of command and obedience, the movement is quietly yet crucially supplying the outlines of a freer society. This prefigurative politics is, in fact, the very strength and vision of today's direct action, where the means themselves are understood to also be the ends. We're not putting off the good society until some distant future but are attempting to carve out room for it in the here and now, however tentative and contorted under the given social order. In turn, this consistency of means and ends implies an ethical approach to politics. How we act now is how we want others to begin to act, too. We try to model a notion of goodness even as we fight for it.

This can implicitly be seen in the affinity group and spokescouncil structures for decision making at direct actions. Both supply much needed spaces in which to school ourselves in direct democracy. Here, in the best of cases, we can proactively set the agenda, carefully deliberate together over questions, and come to decisions that strive to take everyone's needs and desires into account. Substantive discussion replaces checking boxes on a ballot; face-to-face participation replaces handing over our lives to

so-called representatives; nuanced and reasoned solutions replace lesser-of-two-(or three) evils' thinking. The democratic process utilized during demonstrations decentralizes power even as it offers tangible solidarity; for example, affinity groups afford greater and more diverse numbers of people a real share in decision making, while spokescouncils allow for intricate coordination – even on a global level. This is, as 1960s' activists put it, the power to create rather than destroy.

The beauty of this new movement, it could be said, is that it strives to take its own ideals to heart. In doing so, it has perhaps unwittingly created the demand for such directly democratic practices on a permanent basis. Yet the haunting question underlying episodic "street democracy" remains unaddressed: How can everyone come together to make decisions that affect society as a whole in participatory, mutualistic, and ethical ways? In other words, how can each and every one of us – not just a counterculture or this protest movement – really transform and ultimately control our lives and that of our communities?

This is, in essence, a question of power – who has it, how it is used, and to what ends. To varying degrees, we all know the answer in relation to current institutions and systems. We can generally explain what we are against. That is exactly why we are protesting, whether it is against capitalism and/or nation-states, or globalization in whole or part. What we have largely failed to articulate, however, is any sort of response in relation to liberatory institutions and systems. We often can't express, especially in any coherent and utopian manner, what we are for. Even as we prefigure a way of making power horizontal, equitable, and hence, hopefully an essential part of a free society, we ignore the reconstructive vision that a directly democratic process holds up right in front of our noses.

For all intents and purposes, our move-

ment remains trapped. On the one hand, it reveals and confronts domination and exploitation. The political pressure exerted by such widespread agitation may even be able to influence current power structures to amend some of the worst excesses of their ways; the powers that be have to listen, and respond to some extent, when the voices become too numerous and too loud. Nevertheless, most people are still shut out of the decision-making process itself, and consequently, have little tangible power over their lives at all. Without this ability to self-govern, street actions translate into nothing more than a countercultural version of interest group lobbying, albeit far more radical than most and generally unpaid.

What the movement forgets is the promise implicit in its own structure: that power not only needs to be contested; it must also be constituted anew in liberatory and egalitarian forms. This entails taking the movement's directly democratic process seriously--not simply as a tactic to organize protests but as the very way we organize society, specifically the political realm. The issue then becomes: How do we begin to shift the strategy, structure, and values of our movement to the most grassroots level of public policy making?

The most fundamental level of decision making in a demonstration is the affinity group. Here, we come together as friends or because of a common identity, or a combination of the two. We share something in particular; indeed, this common identity is often reflected in the name we choose for our groups. We may not always agree with each

other, but there is a fair amount of homogeneity precisely because we've consciously chosen to come together for a specific reason--most often having little to do with mere geography. This sense



*Protestors surrounded by police in Philadelphia, August 2000
Photo from Independent Media Center - Philadelphia*

"What the movement forgets is the promise implicit in its own structure: that power not only needs to be contested; it must also be constituted anew"

of a shared identity allows for the smooth functioning of a consensus decision-making process, since we start from a place of commonality. In an affinity group, almost by definition, our unity needs to take precedence over our diversity, or our supposed affinity breaks down altogether.

Compare this to what could be the most fundamental level of decision making in a society: a neighborhood or town. Now, geography plays a much larger role. Out of historic, economic, cultural, religious, and other reasons, we may find ourselves living side by side with a wide range of individuals and their various identities. Most of these people are not our friends per se. Still, the very diversity we encounter is the life of a vibrant city itself. The accidents and/or numerous personal decisions that have brought us together often create a fair amount of heterogeneity precisely because we haven't all chosen to come together for a specific reason. In this context, where we start from a place of difference, decision-making mechanisms need to be much more capable of allowing for dissent; that is, diversity needs to be clearly retained within any notions of unity. As such, majoritarian

decision-making processes begin to make more sense.

Then, too, there is the question of scale. It is hard to imagine being friends with hundreds, or even thousands, of people, nor maintaining a single-issue identity with that many individuals; but we can share a feeling of community and a striving toward some common good that allows each of us to flourish. In turn, when greater numbers of people come together on a face-to-face basis to reshape their neighborhoods and towns, the issues as well as the viewpoints will multiply, and alliances will no doubt change depending on the specific topic under discussion. Thus the need for a place where we can meet as human beings at the most face-to-face level -- that is, an assembly of active citizens -- to share our many identities and interests in hopes of balancing both the individual and community in all we do.

As well, trust and accountability function differently at the affinity group versus civic level. We generally reveal more of ourselves to friends; and such unwritten bonds of love and affection hold us more closely together, or at least give us added impetus to work things out. Underlying this is a higher-than-average degree of trust, which serves to make us accountable to each other.

On a community-wide level, the reverse is more often true: accountability allows us to trust each other. Hopefully, we share bonds of solidarity and respect; yet since we can't know each other well, such bonds only make sense if we first determine them together, and then record them, write them down, for all to refer back to in the future, and even revisit if need be. Accountable, democratic structures of our own making, in short, provide the foundation for trust, since the power to decide is both transparent and ever amenable to scrutiny.

There are also issues of time and space. Affinity groups, in the scheme of

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things, are generally temporary configurations – they may last a few months, or a few years, but often not much longer. Once the particular reasons why we've come together have less of an immediate imperative, or as our friendships falter, such groups often fall by the wayside. And even during a group's life span, in the interim between direct actions, there is frequently no fixed place or face-to-face decision making, nor any regularity, nor much of a record of who decided what and how. Moreover, affinity groups are not open to everyone but only those who share a particular identity or attachment. As such, although an affinity group can certainly choose to shut down a street, there is ultimately something slightly authoritarian in small groups taking matters into their own hands, no matter what their political persuasion.

Deciding what to do with streets in general – say, how to organize transportation, encourage street life, provide green space, and so on – should be a matter open to everyone interested if it is to be truly participatory and nonhierarchical. This implies ongoing and open institutions of direct democracy, for everything from decision making to conflict resolution. We need to be able to know when and where citizen assemblies are meeting; we need to meet regularly and make use of nonarbitrary procedures; we need to keep track of what decisions have been made. But more important, if we so choose, we all need to have access to the power to discuss, deliberate, and make decisions about matters that affect our communities and beyond.

Indeed, many decisions have a much wider impact than on just one city; transforming streets, for example, would probably entail coordination on a regional, continental, or even global level. Radicals have long understood such mutualistic self-reliance as a "commune of communes," or confederation. The

"It is time to push beyond the oppositional character of our movement by infusing it with a reconstructive vision."

spokescouncil model used during direct actions hints at such an alternative view of globalization. During a spokescouncil meeting, mandated delegates from our affinity groups gather for the purpose of coordination, the sharing of resources/skills, the building of solidarity, and so forth, always returning to the grassroots level as the ultimate arbiter. If popular assemblies were our basic unit of decision making, confederations of communities could serve as a way to both transcend parochialism and create interdependence where desirable. For instance, rather than global capitalism and international regulatory bodies, where trade is top-down and profit-oriented, confederations could coordinate distribution between regions in ecological and humane ways, while allowing policy in regard to production, say, to remain at the grassroots.

This more expansive understanding of a prefigurative politics would necessarily involve creating institutions that could potentially replace capitalism and nation-states. Such directly democratic institutions are compatible with, and could certainly grow out of, the ones we use during demonstrations, but they very likely won't be mirror images once we reach the level of society. This does not mean abandoning the principles and ideals undergirding the movement (such as freedom, cooperation, decentralism, solidarity, diversity, face-to-face participation, and the like); it merely means recognizing the limits of direct democracy as it is practiced in the context of a demonstration.

Any vision of a free society, if it is to be truly democratic, must of course be worked out by all of us – first in this movement, and later, in our communities and confederations. Even so, we will probably discover that newly defined understandings of citizenship are needed in place of affinity groups; majoritarian methods of decision making that strive

to retain diversity are preferable to simple consensus-seeking models; written compacts articulating rights and duties are crucial to fill out the unspoken culture of protests; and institutionalized spaces for policy making are key to guaranteeing that our freedom to make decisions doesn't disappear with a line of riot police.

It is time to push beyond the oppositional character of our movement by infusing it with a reconstructive vision. That means beginning, right now, to translate our movement structure into institutions that embody the good society; in short, cultivating direct democracy in the places we call home. This will involve the harder work of reinvigorating or initiating civic gatherings, town meetings, neighborhood assemblies, citizen mediation boards, any and all forums where we can come together to decide our lives, even if only in extralegal institutions at first. Then, too, it will mean reclaiming globalization, not as a new phase of capitalism but as its replacement by federated, directly democratic communities coordinated for mutual benefit.

It is time to move from protest to politics, from shutting down streets to opening up public space, from demanding scraps from those few in power to holding power firmly in all our hands. Ultimately, this means moving beyond the question of "Whose Streets?" We should ask instead "Whose Cities?" Then and only then will we be able to remake them as our own.

~ by Cindy Milstein

Cindy Milstein is a faculty member at the Institute for Social Ecology (see <http://www.tao.ca/~ise/> for more on the ISE as well as a companion essay to this one by Ms. Milstein, "Democracy is Direct") and a board member for the Institute for Anarchist Studies. Cindy can be reached at cbmikstein@aol.com.

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would point to the necessity of understanding and participating in struggles against racism, sexism, the WTO, etc., and in doing so to see the interactions among those struggles and the oppressions those struggles seek to overturn, without trying to reduce them all to a simple formula.

*M*any anarchists feel it is imperative to create a public intellectual culture and that, increasingly, the university is not a place that encourages intellectual freedom, not to mention political thought. What is your experience? I agree that the university is a questionable source of intellectual culture...I believe that the reality of an intellectual culture is difficult to achieve now, because with the "mall-ization" of the U.S. the whole idea of public space is being marginalized. Some say that the internet is a new place for a public culture, but I have my doubts. First, the sheer size of the internet makes the intimacy of an intellectual culture difficult to achieve.

Second, there is something about sharing the same space and time in conversation that is denied by the internet, something without which interchange remains too anonymous in character. I don't think the internet is useless; but its ability to substitute for what we have lost is more limited than some folks think.

*C*an you respond to critics who charge that poststructuralist theory (postmodernism in general) is an example of a highly specialized, abstract and obscure language that is alienating to most people and doesn't encourage thought outside of a graduate department?

Guilty as charged. But that doesn't apply only to poststructuralists and postmodernists. It is a general problem across the humanities and across academics generally. We talk to one another rather than to those outside our immediate circle. There are a number of reasons for this: pressure to publish, the history of anti-intellectualism in the U.S., etc. But we also contribute by adopting the jargon

we do. I have tried to stay away from jargon as much as possible, and I hope that my anarchism book, although difficult, is at least not laden with jargon. But what you're pointing to is a problem for all academics, and only serves to marginalize us further.

*G*iven that "knowledge, like other subjects, is a matter of struggle and domination" and recent publish or perish/cost-analysis tendencies of universities, how does poststructuralism escape being just another commodity?

Much of poststructuralist discourse is, of course, just like other academic discourse in that it replicates the current academic system of ideas in the cost-benefit consumerist model currently dominating academia. I think that change comes not only through the ideas themselves but, especially in academics, who's spouting them. The real question, it seems to me, is whether people are living these ideas out or whether they are just holding them as ideas. ~

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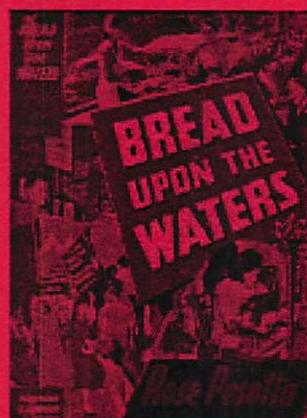
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